

Love Him in My Absence

by anogete

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

Did You Just Hire Me?

Chapter 1 of 15

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Chapter 1: Did You Just Hire Me?

Potions Assistant required for full time position. Demanding work. Experience a must. Serious applicants only. Leave CV with shopkeeper.

Hermione read the small flyer several times before glancing around her at the many vials, jars, and bottles filled with expensive ingredients. She had been to several apothecaries today, and it was the first time she had seen this particular sign. Many of the other advertisements were posted in nearly all of the shops she visited, but none of them grabbed her attention quite like this one had. It was written in block letters on a crisp piece of stark white parchment.

After the defeat of Voldemort, she had spent three years working as an apprentice for a renowned charms expert at Beauxbatons. She performed so well that she was permitted to take over his lower level classes, and she spent an additional two years teaching. Eventually, she was offered a position as a professor at the school, but after only a few minutes of serious consideration, she had turned it down, and instead accepted a job at the Ministry of Magic working with Arthur Weasley. It was an attempt to stay close to her friends and the life to which she was accustomed. At the time, it had seemed like the proper thing to do, but after only a few months of working there, she had begun to fall into boredom and had started dabbling with experimental potions in her free time.

At first it was a mere hobby that consumed no more than an hour or two every other day in her rented flat. Now she was spending nearly all of her free time conducting potions research and development in her own makeshift laboratory that had taken over most of the kitchen. She devoured every academic potions journal available and even submitted three articles herself, two of which were accepted and published under her pseudonym, Jane Wharton. Her work wasn't groundbreaking, but it was unique. She had no formal training in the art with the exception of what she had learned while attending Hogwarts. Her perspective was a fresh one and welcomed by some, but not all, of the experts who organized and published the journals each quarter.

After the second paper was accepted Hermione realized that she had gotten it all wrong. Her heart had never truly been in charms, but in potions. It was just far less intimidating to request a recommendation letter from Professor Flitwick than Professor Snape. Garnering an apprenticeship to a potions master without such a letter was unheard of in the magical world. Her only recourse at the moment was to work her way into the field from the bottom up because she refused to use her status as Harry Potter's friend to her advantage. She had noticed that apothecaries would allow independent potion makers to advertise for assistants in the shops. This was the obvious place to start: work for a potion maker and perhaps he could apprentice her or recommend her to a Potions master.

While she didn't mind performing the grunt work, she did not want to end up in an assembly line of potion-making. It would defeat her purpose to find herself in a position where she was a nameless, faceless robot who stirred a cauldron eight hours a day. She wanted a challenge, and she wanted to learn more. The thirst for knowledge had never waned over the years, not even a little, and the small piece of parchment had intrigued her. *Demanding work, huh? I happen to love work of that sort.*

The only thing that deterred her was the lack of a contact. The brief note had instructed her to leave a résumé with the shop owner, yet it was fairly obvious that he wasn't the one asking for an assistant.

"Excuse me?" Hermione's voice was soft, but carried well enough in the silent shop.

The shopkeeper glanced up from his copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

"This sign here," she said, "is there a specific person I should contact by owl?"

The old man grunted and sniffed slightly. "Just leave your information with me, and he'll be in contact with you if he's interested."

Hermione frowned. *Why the secrecy? Everyone else left a name to contact via owl. Why not this one as well?*

After a moment's hesitation, she pulled a single sheet from her coat and handed it to the shopkeeper. He eyed the carefully printed information. She had used a charmed quill to copy the résumé several times over in case she felt the need to apply to several different potion makers. They were all still in her pocket, save this one.

"I'll pass this on to him."

Hermione gave him a prim nod. "Thank you. I would appreciate that."

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She was beginning to become desperate. The job at the Ministry was particularly numbing, and Arthur Weasley's unending and pure glee over examining Muggle objects was wearing on her nerves. She had always thought of him as a second father, but even children could become exasperated with their parents at times.

It had been nearly two weeks since she had given her résumé to the proprietor of the small apothecary, and hope of finally obtaining a job to alleviate her extreme intellectual boredom was dwindling. *Perhaps I should have used my real name on the résumé. Surely Hermione Granger would have at least ensured me an owl from the potions maker.*

Hermione wrapped up her workday and slipped out of the office five minutes early. She planned on spending the evening at home with Crookshanks and a good book, preferably a Muggle one, to take her mind off the wizarding world and her desire to delve into the art of potions without so much as an advisor on the subject.

The owl tapped on her kitchen window as she was fixing a quick dinner. She didn't see Hedwig's remarkable white feathers, so she assumed it wasn't Harry sending her an update on his Quidditch career. It was a good thing, too, because she hardly thought she could handle him prattling on and on about the subject. She lifted the window and allowed the owl entrance. He pecked at a loaf of bread on the counter while Hermione carefully untied the unfamiliar envelope from his leg. Just as she pulled the string free, the owl extended his wings and jumped toward the open window. Moments later he was gone from sight.

Hermione glanced over the envelope as she sat down at the small table in her kitchen. It was devoid of any sort of identifying mark or emblem. Despite her severe curiosity over the contents, she had the presence of mind to cast a simple spell to detect possible danger. The letter was just that: a letter. There was no evil lurking within. Carefully, she tore the end of the envelope open and slid the parchment out.

*Miss Wharton,*

*You résumé offered no previous experience in potions with the exception of your required schooling. While I have my doubts as to your abilities because of this, I would prefer to conduct a brief interview before making a final decision. I am available Friday at noon. If this is acceptable, please notify me as soon as possible, and we shall meet at The Four Winds Café.*

*S. Jonas*

Hermione read the letter at least three times before pushing a cauldron out of the way so she could place it flat on the tabletop. S. Jonas certainly didn't seem like a very nice person, but she had found that many accomplished potions masters were reclusive and disliked interaction. This Mr. Jonas seemed no different. Anything had to be better than spending another month working for the Ministry, and this was her first promising lead, as long as she could convince him that she was competent enough to brew potions.

Pulling out a new piece of parchment and a new quill as well, she wrote a brief response to confirm that she would be happy to meet him. She didn't have an owl to send the reply, but the Ministry had several, and no one would notice if she commandeered one for a small personal errand the following morning.

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The Four Winds Café was across the street from the apothecary where she had found the advertisement. It was just this side of being one of the more upscale wizarding establishments, but was affordable enough for a Ministry lackey like her to frequent once in a while. The decor was tasteful and the walls, artwork, linens, and window dressing were all various shades of blue. The dark wood tables and chairs blended well with the color scheme. Hermione had perched herself on one of the barstools while she waited for him to arrive.

Her finger traced the patterns the blue flecks created in the bright white marble slab that was the bar top. Her tall glass of water was quickly gathering beads of condensation. She was nervous and couldn't seem to still her hands from busying themselves when she faintly heard the soft chime of the bell that indicated someone had entered. Moments later, she felt the air move behind her as someone walked by.

The gentleman behind the bar looked over her shoulder and nodded. "Sir."

"Samuel. I'll be at my usual table. I'm expecting a guest Miss Jane Wharton. Send her to me when she arrives."

Hermione's heart stopped. She knew that voice, knew it extremely well actually. She had chosen the name Jane Wharton by glancing at her bookshelf one evening and picking a first and last name from the many titles. It only took her a moment to drop the clues into place. Severus Snape was using a fake name as well. S. Jonas.

She hesitantly turned on the stool and watched his back as he strode toward the furthest table from the door. He took the seat facing the front of the restaurant, with his back to the wall, and pulled out a folded journal that had been tucked under his arm. His eyes hadn't even glanced her way. She could leave now if she wanted to, but that would mean going back to her job at the Ministry, and another week of Arthur Weasley asking her to explain the use of a videocassette was sure to drive her off the deep end.

Apparently Professor Snape was her alternative, though she didn't think that her old professor was going to receive her very well at all when she introduced herself. While she had changed over the years, the physical difference was minimal from her final year at Hogwarts.

With a steadying breath and a smile at the gentleman behind the bar, she stood and walked over to Snape's table. His eyes were still firmly fixed on the potions journal in his hands. He looked no better than he had at the height of the war against Voldemort. Those were stressful times, and they made everyone look worse for the wear. However, the changes in Snape's current appearance weren't very noticeable; his hair was slightly longer, but not by more than an inch, and it still looked heavy, hanging down the sides of his face like a curtain. His skin was still pale, and his clothes were the same as they had always been layered, formal, and black.

She stopped just a foot from the table and waited for him to acknowledge her.

"You should have told me you were sitting at the bar when I spoke to Samuel, Miss Wharton," he said without looking up.

Hermione swallowed her nerves. "I apologize, Professor. Your presence took me by surprise. I expected to meet Mr. Jonas here."

Snape's gaze snapped up so fast that she nearly took a step back. His dark eyes locked with hers for a brief moment before averting and returning to the journal. "Miss Granger, I was unaware that you would be in need of a pseudonym when your rightful name would garner you any position you desired."

"I prefer to obtain things on my own merits, not my history as one of Harry Potter's friends," Hermione responded, lifting her chin just the slightest bit.

Snape closed the journal and raised his eyes again, settling on a spot just over her shoulder. "Yes. Well, Miss Granger, it seems that we've both been mistaken, and as such I believe you can find your own way to the door."

"Excuse me?"

Snape swept his eyes back to meet her own and raised his brows in question.

Hermione cleared her throat and barreled on. "I was under the impression that you were looking for an assistant, sir. I applied for the position. I apologize for not giving you my actual name, but I did not want special treatment."

He snorted under his breath and flicked the potions journal open again.

She focused on his long fingers curled over the creased parchment. "As you're well aware, I received high marks each year in Potions. I've also been spending my free time experimenting and brushing up on my skills."

"Do you mean to say you are still considering this?"

"This? Working as your assistant? Of course," Hermione said. "I promise to work extremely hard, and I believe myself to be qualified for the position despite my lack of formal training beyond Hogwarts."

Snape tossed the journal onto the table. "Really, Miss Granger, I hardly think this is a feasible arrangement."

"Why?" Desperation was beginning to rise in her. He seemed indifferent to her presence and seemed to consider the possibility of employing her a joke.

"You're an insufferable know-it-all who I could barely tolerate while I was being paid to do so. It seems to me a far-fetched idea that I would pay you for your deplorable company and questionable assistance."

Hermione felt her face burn, and her fingers clenched tightly into fists at her sides. "You know as well as I do that I'm completely capable of assisting you. I excelled at Potions even though you would never admit it. As for my know-it-all qualities, you can't judge a twenty-three-year-old by her actions when she was twelve."

"Respect, Miss Granger," Snape reminded her.

"Can't you just pretend that I'm not Hermione Granger?"

He didn't reply for a long moment, but his eyes remained on the swirls of the wooden tabletop. She held her breath, waiting for a response. "Very well," he finally said. "You may have a seat, and we'll discuss your misguided confidence in your skills."

She jerked the chair away from the table and stiffly sat down. *Why does he have to be such a contemptible prat all the time? One would think that he'd get over himself once the war ended, but he's just as much the bat of the dungeons now than ever before.*

"I insist on the best," Snape said, interrupting her thoughts. "You'll work long hours, and I trust I don't have to remind you that I'm not the easiest person to work for."

"Yes, sir."

"You will follow my instructions without deviation and will keep that mouth of yours closed. I don't want to be inundated with countless questions every minute of every day."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, sir."

Snape reached into his robes and pulled out a white card with black lettering. He held it between his index and middle fingers. "You work for me only as long as I will tolerate you," he said before tossing the card onto the table in front of her. "The address," was all he offered as explanation. "Be there tomorrow at seven in the morning, ready to work."

He abruptly stood and gathered his robes about himself. A long-fingered hand snatched the journal from the table and neatly tucked it under his right arm.

"Did you just hire me?" Things were going far too fast for Hermione to follow.

"Consider it an audition."

"I thought you didn't believe me capable of brewing your potions," she challenged.

An odd combination of a smirk and a scowl curled his lips. "I never was one for giving compliments and praise, Miss Granger. Seven o'clock sharp." He turned and walked toward the door before briefly turning back to her. "And do tie that mess you call hair back before you arrive."

Author's Note: First, I would like to thank the best beta in the world, Snarkyroxy. Allyness29 and Jessica have also been of great help with the first few chapters. Second, this is my very first HP fic, so I would appreciate any feedback you'd like to offer. Just so there are no unintentional surprises, the fic is completed for the most part. It is fifteen chapters and is rated W for the content of the last two chapters. I plan on posting one chapter a week, provided the mods here aren't too overwhelmed by the queue this lovely summer.

Terminus Est

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Chapter 2: Terminus Est

Hermione smoothed her blouse, pulled her robes together in the front, and fastened them to hide her Muggle clothes underneath. She didn't think Professor Snape would take kindly to anything but a proper robe in his laboratory, and her intention today was to impress him. She had gone home yesterday after their meeting with mixed feelings on the subject. He could teach her a great deal, and if she could learn from him, she would undoubtedly have one of the most advanced potions educations in the country.

However, as much as he could teach her, she was unsure she could look beyond his biting insults and constant belittlement of anyone beneath his station. In regards to Snape, things had changed little after Voldemort's death. He remained a difficult person and was just as reclusive and demanding as ever. Hermione thought she would have received a word or two of gratitude from him when she had testified on his behalf once the battle was over. At the time, he was still facing a charge of murder by an Unforgivable Curse. However, his actions during the final battle, and a Pensieve discovered after the fact, revealed that he was simply following orders, performing a task dictated by Dumbledore and set in motion by the Unbreakable Vow he had been forced to make.

The hearing to decide his fate had been the last time she had seen him until yesterday. He hadn't even approached her after her testimony sealed his freedom; instead, he took the first opportunity to stand and exit the room when the Ministry officials gave him permission to leave. Hermione had spent the intervening years convincing herself that she didn't care, but now that she was in contact with him, even if it was dubious contact, she discovered that the slight really had wounded her. She had spent so many years trying to earn his approval in the classroom, and she couldn't even obtain it by helping him avoid Azkaban.

There was a moment's consideration given to telling Harry or Ron she had caught up with their old nemesis, but she felt it better to be cautious this time around and keep the interview to herself. Once he ridiculed her and unceremoniously shoved her out of his precious laboratory, she would feel better about complaining to her two best friends. In fact, she hadn't told anyone about her encounter with Professor Snape. If he caught wind of her blabbing about a possible position with him, then he would surely mark her off the list of acceptable applicants.

Truth be told, Hermione hadn't even realized Snape was brewing potions for commercial use, and she couldn't help but wonder which brand in the apothecary was his. Different companies, large and small alike, came and went so quickly she couldn't pin down a particular brand that surfaced after his release from custody. It would have to be one of the higher-priced brands that offered exotic and much sought-after potions many didn't have the skill to make.

The building was nondescript and sat on the edge of Hogsmeade. The dark green shutters on the front windows were closed and the off-white cottage was quaint and unassuming. The flowerbeds that lined the front wall were filled with common herbs used in many potions. Their fragrance was soothing and reminded her of comfortable times in front of her cauldron.

She quickly made her way up the stone path and knocked on the front door. Her Muggle watch was useless here, but she knew it was just a few minutes before seven o'clock, their arranged meeting time. As seconds ticked by she became overly anxious, her nerves finally taking their toll. Hermione absently flicked some dust off the sleeve of her blue robes. Blue was neutral. If she came here in her red set, then he would slam the door in her face for sure.

The door clicked open, and Snape appeared in the entryway. His hair was obscuring half his face, and the sleeves of his robe were rolled up to reveal pale forearms beneath. "Miss Granger," he said in a fair attempt at formal cordiality.

As he moved out of the doorway, she nodded politely. "Professor Snape, sir."

"Don't make me stand here all day with my door wide open, girl. Come in or go home."

Hermione quickly stepped inside. The house was slightly musty from what must have been years of disuse. The furniture was sparse in the two rooms she could see from her vantage point. There was a dining room that held only a small wooden table cluttered with parchment and a living room with two armchairs and an end table between them.

"This way," Snape said as he turned his back on her and walked down a hallway to her left. Hermione rolled her eyes at the dramatic swish of his robes and followed along behind him, keeping a fair distance between them.

Just a few steps down the hall he made a quick turn to the right into a room lit only by a couple lamps hanging from the walls and the sunlight from two high windows along the back. It was obviously a potions lab from the long, sturdy tables that lined the walls and the island in the middle that held two cauldrons, to the shelves upon shelves of bottles, jars, and vials that were meticulously labeled. It was like a dream come true after working in such cramped quarters in her kitchen. "Amazing..." Hermione whispered to herself as she stepped forward and scanned the rows of ingredients with her eyes.

"Indeed," Snape agreed.

Glancing down, she saw two small boxes of dark blue bottles. A neatly printed label was on each of them. *Terminus Est*. Her eyes widened, and she spun around to face Snape. "Terminus Est? That's you?" After the first moment of disbelief, she shook her head. "No, I should have known as much. They're some of the most expensive potions in the apothecaries, and also some of the most sought-after, not to mention..." Hermione's voice trailed off, and she snapped her mouth shut.

Snape sneered at her and sauntered over to pick up a bottle. "Go on, Miss Granger," he said.

"Well, I mean, some of them... they're..."

"They're teetering on the line that divides us from dark magic," Snape finished for her.

Hermione swallowed and turned away. That was what she had been trying to say, but she wasn't certain if it would anger him. An angry Snape was the last thing she needed. This was her dream job regardless of Snape being her boss. She needed to get away from the Ministry and their in-depth analysis into soda and how exactly Muggles put the bubbles into the drink.

"You have a wonderful potions lab, Professor. I highly admire your work. I've actually purchased and used your Dreamless Sleep potion a few times before. I don't think I need to tell you that it was flawless," Hermione said as she surveyed the room one more time before turning back to face him.

Snape had put the bottle down inside the box and was watching her intently now. "Spare me your compliments. You're here to audition for the position of my assistant, are you not?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

He gestured to one of the cauldrons on the island in the middle of the room. "Determine what that potion is and finish it."

Hermione took a few hesitant steps forward before throwing her shoulders back and taking a final decisive step up to the counter. The unprepared ingredients were all laid out beside the bubbling cauldron. All but one or two of the ingredients were familiar to her, and she set her mind to working, running the combinations through her brain until she had narrowed down the possibilities to two potions, neither of which she had brewed. One required only a half an hour to prepare and another hour to cool before bottling. The second possibility required an exhaustive six hours of brewing, but could be bottled right away.

The first is too easy. He's just a big enough prat to expect me to spend my Saturday brewing a complicated, time-intensive potion while he sits on his arse and critiques.

Hermione pulled in a deep breath and slowly exhaled through her nose. The second it would be. She was unsure if she remembered all of the steps, but the only thing she could do was attempt it. Failure would see her back at the Ministry dissecting televisions, and success would hopefully find her with a new job working for Professor Snape. Harry and Ron would just die if they knew she was crossing her fingers for a position as Snape's assistant. *No, Ron, I have not gone mental. I'm simply starved for some intellectual stimulation.*

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It was times like this that Hermione hated her hair. She had considered cutting it when she graduated from Hogwarts, but never followed through. It was now frizzed from the moisture rising from the cauldron and entirely unmanageable even with the majority of it tied back. She let out her frustration on a stray piece that had fallen down her forehead by sticking out her lower lip and blowing furiously. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Snape's raised eyebrow as he observed her annoyance.

He'd been watching her for hours and only left twice for no more than a minute at a time. Reading material was laid out in front of him, but his eyes had been following her movements for the majority of the day. Having worked under his watchful eye for seven years at Hogwarts, his attention to her work didn't make her nervous. He did not bother to initiate conversation, and Hermione thought it best to stick to the task of brewing the potion correctly.

*Three more stirs, add the rosemary, reduce the heat, and I'll be done.*The potion was the perfect color, or at least theoretically the correct color. Reading detailed instructions to potion-making when she had no intention of making the potion actually did pay off in the end. Hermione dropped the chopped and measured rosemary in before reducing the heat and floating the cauldron to the tabletop to cool.

Snape's eyes followed the cauldron and then returned to her when she spoke. "I'm finished, Professor."

"The potion you just made?"

"Gareth's Elixir, sir. It is used to heal severe burns caused by fire, but cannot combat burns inflicted by magic. It was discovered and fine-tuned by Harlow Gareth in the mid-seventeenth century. It is still considered to be the most effective burn healing potion today, but is rarely stocked by hospitals due to its price and difficulty to come by."

"That's quite enough, Miss Granger. I don't need the entire paragraph from *Most Potente Potions* repeated back to me. I'm familiar enough with it."

Hermione gritted her teeth and dropped her eyes back to the cauldron. "Yes, sir."

"One problem, Miss Granger; you increased the heat too quickly after you added the three aloe leaves. The sudden rise in temperature counteracts the longevity of the brew and drops the shelf life from six months to one week. I won't be able to sell that."

Hermione's jaw opened and closed, but no sound came out. The instructions were too faint in her mind, and she easily could have forgotten the importance of the timing. She had no excuse for her mistake. Even so, how was she to learn to create all of these potions and be a proper assistant if he was unwilling to correct her mistakes when she made them? "Why didn't you stop me, Professor?"

He watched her with cold, dispassionate eyes. "It is not my position to interrupt your audition and correct your mistakes."

She nodded slowly and grabbed her bag from the floor by her feet. If that's the way things were, then she knew what he was saying. She should just get out of the house before he ripped into her and made her bite back the tears. Apparently, a change from him was too much to hope for after all these years. "I understand, Professor. Good evening. Thank you for your time," she mumbled as she pushed through the door and quickly made her way down the hall.

Her hand was on the doorknob when she heard his voice behind her. "Where do you think you are going, Miss Granger? I don't recall dismissing you for the day."

Hermione abruptly turned around to face him. Snape was casually leaning against the wall at the mouth of the hallway. His arms were crossed, and one of his boots was crossed in front of the other. "Well... I... I just assumed... that... well..."

"Spit it out, girl."

"I didn't complete the potion properly. I wasted your ingredients and your time."

His face was devoid of emotion or any hint of his thoughts. "Yes, even so, I trust I will see you at seven o'clock on Monday morning, two weeks from now. I acknowledge that you will be providing the Ministry with your notice of resignation and give them ample time to find a replacement."

"Sir? Excuse me?"

"Monday through Friday, beginning at seven o'clock. We work until the day's tasks are complete, and then you may leave. I'll pay you what the Ministry is paying you to start."

Hermione felt like her jaw had dropped to the floor. Snape was actually offering her a job? She opened and closed her mouth several times in an attempt to say something positive to affirm to him that this was what she wanted.

Snape gave her a slight smirk that reeked of self-satisfaction. "If only it were always so easy to render you speechless, Miss Granger. I rather enjoy the silence," he said. "You may see yourself out now. Good day." With that said, he swept back down the hall, his robes trailing in his wake.

Hermione nearly followed him to demand that he explain his reasoning to her, but she didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth. She decided to keep her mouth shut and go home. If she was going to work with him, then she'd have all the time she wanted to pick his brain. For now she would leave him alone instead of jeopardizing her new job.

Once outside the cottage, she Apparated back home to the living room of her flat. Crookshanks was curled up on the couch awaiting her return. He jumped down and padded across the room to follow her into the kitchen. Still in a daze, Hermione dumped his food into a small glass bowl and sat it down on the floor beside his water.

"You will never believe what just happened to me, boy," she said as Crookshanks lapped up his food. "I just got a new job working for Professor Snape." A huge smile spread over her face as the realization sunk in. "I am going to be working with a renowned Potions Master making some of the highest quality potions available. No more zippers, Velcro, and rubber ducky dissection for me!"

Hermione spun around in a circle before snatching a pint of ice cream from the freezer. On her way to the couch, she grabbed a spoon from the dish drainer. Crookshanks finished his food and curled up beside her, his chest vibrating with a content purr.

The thought of working with Snape wasn't exactly exhilarating, but the idea of pursuing her dream of potions certainly made up for his personality. She knew he was prone to mood swings and dramatics even from her days as his student at Hogwarts. He seemed no different now; he was still using his robes to command authority and his sharp tongue to cut others down. The only real concern Hermione had was Snape tossing her out on her arse without warning because of some minor mistake she made. She needed a job to pay the bills, and her small savings couldn't tide her over for long if he did go into a fit and fire her on the spot.

*I just need to remain calm and careful while working. I know I can do it; I just need to follow through, and I can't let him upset me. If I'm upset I'll just make mistakes mistakes that could lose me my job.*

She knew that if she could just weather Snape's difficult personality there was a chance she could excel and earn his approval. Hermione had spent years at Hogwarts trying to earn that illusive approval only to be met with biting commentary on her few faults and even her physical appearance at times. Perhaps if he saw her as an employee and not a student, as Hermione Granger and not Harry Potter's friend, then she might stand a chance at gaining his approval. She could go far with a reference like that.

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"Are you mental?"

Hermione felt her jaw tighten. She had expected this reaction, but that didn't make it any easier. "No, Ronald, I am not."

"Only a nutter would want to work with that greasy git. If it's a new job you want, then I'm sure my dad can talk to his "

"I don't want to work for the Ministry, Ron, and I don't need your father to talk to anyone. You know as well as I do that if I used my real name I could get any job I wanted."

"So why don't you? Anything's better than putting up with that bat," Ron said, taking a bite of his sandwich. He looked across the table at Harry for support, but Harry just shrugged and turned back to Hermione.

She frowned. "He is *not* a bat, Ronald. You're an adult and shouldn't be calling others names. Furthermore, I won't be given a free ticket in this world because I'm riding on Harry's coat tails. I absolutely refuse "

"The Ministry has a potions department," Harry said, interrupting her.

Hermione turned her attention to Harry. "I know that, Harry, but my heart is in research and development. Anything worthwhile is coming out of the private sector. You and I both know that. The Ministry's department is a joke among private enterprise. I'm trying to make a career out of this, not just a job."

"But isn't there someone besides... Snape?" Harry asked softly.

She slammed her glass of Butterbeer down on the table. "Professor Snape is one of the most accomplished Potions Masters in the world. Why would I turn down a chance to work with him and learn from him? A letter of recommendation from him would be as good as gold to all other Potions Masters. I could get a job anywhere after spending a few years with him. I could go into business for myself." She threw her hands in the air. "Don't you see? This is a perfect opportunity for me."

"He doesn't even like us, Hermione," Harry muttered.

"Hates us," Ron said, nodding his head in agreement.

She took a sip from her mug. "He's as disagreeable as they come, but I can get over that. I don't see why you two are so opposed to this. I'm the one who is going to have to endure him on a daily basis while you're both off playing Quidditch."

"We just worry about you," Harry said.

Hermione smiled at Harry and Ron. "It's sweet that you both care so much, but I can take care of myself."

"You and both of us," Ron said.

Harry laughed and nudged Hermione's arm. "Yeah."

"Are you going to eat that?" Ron asked, eyeing the second half of Hermione's sandwich.

She pushed the dish toward him and rolled her eyes. "No, but I get the feeling you are."

Author's Note: A huge thank you to Snarkyroxy and all of her hard work as my beta that made this fic better than it would have been otherwise. As with the first chapter, I also got some excellent advice from Allynness and Jessica, so thanks go out to them as well. I'd also like to thank everyone who offered words of encouragement on the first chapter. I really do appreciate every kind comment.

The First Day

Chapter 3 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

Chapter 3: The First Day

Hermione ran a hand over the top of her head, making sure there were no stray hairs to detract from her professional appearance. She had taken extra care to arrive a few minutes early and in a fresh set of robes that would allow her movement without showing stains from any ingredients that may find their way on her during the course of the day. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun at the nape of her neck to prevent it from hanging over the cauldrons. The first day at a new job was always exhilarating and nerve-racking. She wanted to do well, especially since it was Snape she needed to impress.

When she lifted a hand to knock, his front door swung open of its own accord. There was no one in the entryway and no one in the living room or dining room. She suspected that the door had been spelled to open. She hesitantly made her way down the hall and stuck her head into the potion laboratory.

Professor Snape was standing before a bubbling cauldron, his hair falling across both sides of his face, and a pale hand poised over the potion. "Don't just stand there, Miss Granger. I'm paying you, am I not?" His voice was low, and he sounded slightly annoyed. "There is a list of potions you will be brewing today on the counter along the back wall. You may use the cauldrons there."

"Yes, sir," she said, walking around him to find the list. All of the potions were simple ones she had made in class with him years ago. Hermione almost spoke up and

asked him if he didn't have something more challenging, but stopped herself. It would be rude, and he was paying her to help him. *From the bottom up, Hermione, she told herself. You've got to start at the bottom and work your way up, just like everyone else. This will be good for you. It builds character.* She nearly laughed at herself and her silly thoughts; instead, she spread out the five cauldrons and looked over the list again.

While the potions were simple ones, the quantities were large. One batch of each wouldn't do. She would have to do several batches to fill the orders. "Professor, where may I find..."

Snape cut off her question with a sneer in his voice. "The commonly used ingredients are on the shelves along the walls. The remaining ingredients are in the storage closet to your left. All are in alphabetical order. I suggest you get started."

Hermione clamped her teeth together. "Yes, sir," she said softly.

The ingredients were meticulously labeled and organized. Everything she needed was found on the shelves along the walls, just as he said. Within a few minutes she had the majority of the ingredients for the first potion prepared and laying in front of all five cauldrons. Hermione had decided it would be best to work her way through the potions one at a time and use all five cauldrons at once. It would be more efficient and would give her the high volume that was listed on the paper in Snape's oddly neat, yet rather severe handwriting.

She set the first five batches to brewing and turned to look at Snape. His back was to her as he busied himself with his own two cauldrons sitting on the island. It was doubtful that he'd turn to face her so she spoke to his back instead. "Sir, I would just like to thank you for this opportunity to work with you. It really is a privilege, and I want you to know that I appreciate"

"Flattery gets you nowhere in life, Miss Granger. Silence is much better," Snape said without looking away from his work.

Hermione was stunned. She had expected him to brush off any compliments, but she didn't expect him to be so cold. "I'm sorry, sir," she mumbled before turning back to her work.

She watched the five identical cauldrons as the liquid turned from dark green to yellow. The first cauldron she set to boiling was nearly complete, and she carefully took it off the flame. After a quiet stasis charm, she moved on to the next and repeated her work. As she was bottling the fruits of her labor, she tried to rouse Snape into a discussion.

"How long have you been in business, Professor? I've seen the Terminus Est line in the apothecaries for nearly a year, but I was unaware that you were the Potions Master behind it."

"Long enough," Snape said as he dropped a handful of black powder into his cauldron. A puff of smoke billowed up from the brew and dissipated quickly in the air. Hermione watched his movements from behind because he still wouldn't turn to acknowledge her.

"What are you making? It looks very interesting."

"What I am making, Miss Granger, is none of your business. I suggest you return to your work and cease these incessant questions. I prefer not to discuss my art with an amateur."

Hermione's stomach dropped to her feet, and she spun around. She placed shaky hands on the countertop and took a deep breath. If she was going to continue to work with him, then she would have to get used to his little outbursts. She would also have to get used to the silence if he was bent on not speaking to her while they were brewing. *Who am I kidding?* Hermione thought. *He doesn't want to talk to me at all, not just when he's brewing a potion.*

The nervousness and dismay quickly turned to indignity and anger over his rudeness and disregard for her abilities. She knew that she had a knack for potions, yet he treated her as if she knew nothing. It made her cheeks burn with outrage. She finished bottling the first potion and cleaned the cauldrons with jerky movements. The second and third potions could be made together, two cauldrons being used for the second and three cauldrons for the third.

She snatched up the proper ingredients and began to prepare them. Her mind was half on her work and half on her situation as Snape's new employee. She couldn't go running back to the Ministry and Ron's father now. She'd have to stick this out and ignore him when he said hurtful things to her. *I shouldn't even take it seriously. He's just a bitter old man who hates everything and everyone. Of course he's going to treat me the same way he always has. I don't know why I thought it would be any different.*

Hermione pulled up a stool and propped her chin on her palm as she watched the two potions brew. They would be done a few minutes before noon if her calculations were correct. The lab had become stifling, and she felt the need to get out. As soon as these batches were complete, she would bottle them and go to lunch at the Three Broomsticks. A Butterbeer would do her good, and it might get her mind of the hateful man working behind her.

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Lunch passed by quickly, and Hermione trudged back down the path that led to Snape's cottage on the outskirts. Apparation would have been faster, but she relished the time alone to think about her situation. There was simply nothing to be done for it. She would have to hold her tongue and do as she was told. Backtalk could only get her fired, and that was the last thing she needed after obtaining her dream job, even if it wasn't with her dream boss.

Snape was still looming over his cauldron when she returned. Several small bottles were sitting on the countertop beside him. Hermione could only assume that he had just finished bottling a potion. Instead of breaking for lunch, he had started on a new one. She itched to ask him about the potions he was brewing, but she knew it would only lead to trouble and a verbal tongue-lashing from him. She quickly walked across the room to her cauldrons and began readying her work area for the remaining potions.

While she was preparing ingredients, time went by quickly, and while she was waiting on the potion to brew to the proper consistency and color, the time slowed down to a crawl. After a long afternoon of brewing several different potions, she bottled her final batch and carefully cleaned up after herself. She took care to leave the countertop and cauldrons exactly as she had found them that morning. Once she was satisfied, she turned to face Snape, but all she saw, yet again, was his back. The man was forever looming over a cauldron.

Hermione cleared her throat. "I've finished the potions on the list, Professor. They're bottled, labeled, and I've placed them in the proper boxes. Is there anything else you require this evening?" she said, trying to keep her voice firm, and also trying to keep her dislike of him from creeping into her tone.

"No, you may leave for the day. I find I can tolerate your bothersome presence no longer," he said without even looking up or turning around to face her.

Hermione gritted her teeth so hard that her jaw began to ache from the pressure. "Good evening, Professor," she replied in an icy voice cold enough to rival even his.

She snatched her bag from the floor and rushed out of the room. The front door slammed in her wake as she exited the cottage and stopped for a moment on the stone path to catch her breath. If she attempted Disapparation while upset, then there was a chance she wouldn't get home in one piece.

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Her second full day working for Snape was drawing to a close. It had been better than the first day only because she hadn't bothered to initiate conversation. He had made it abundantly clear on her first day that talking to her was the last thing he wanted to do.

So much for being more than Harry Potter's friend Hermione thought bitterly as she bottled up her last potion. The list today had been nearly the same as the day before. It was disappointing, but she still held out hope that he would entrust her with something more exotic and challenging than menial fifth-year potions that she would have been capable of brewing in her first year.

Sometimes Hermione thought that he really didn't think her capable of brewing a potion with a higher degree of difficulty, but most of the time she knew that he gave her these simple potions just to grate on her nerves. It was certainly working. *Perhaps he's trying to break me make me quit so he can get rid of me with a clean conscience.*

Snape hadn't uttered a word to her all day long. The only thing she had said to him all day was a terse reminder that she was going to lunch and would be back shortly. The comment got no response from him.

When the workday was at an end, she gave him a curt "good evening" and left.

Author's Note: Big, big, huge thanks go out to Snarkyroxy for her invaluable help as a beta. Jessica and Allynness29 also gave the chapter a once-over for me. As I said before, this fic is complete. I'll be posting at least one chapter a week until all fifteen chapters are up. Thank you all for being so receptive and supportive by giving such wonderful feedback. You all rock.

Maybe Things Are Going to Be Fine After All

Chapter 4 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

Chapter 4: Maybe Things Are Going to Be Fine After All

Her third and fourth days at work went much the same as the second. The potions were horribly simple and the conversation nonexistent. She had expected much more interaction or even a bit of unwilling instruction from him. She knew he hated to teach, but he had done it for so many years she thought it would have been second nature to step in and instruct her during the first week.

He appeared to work tirelessly from dawn to dusk. He was already brewing when she arrived in the morning at seven o'clock. Hermione never noticed him eat lunch or stop to get more than a sip of water during the day. He was still hard at work when she left in the evening between five and six o'clock.

Hermione had always held a certain level of respect for Professor Snape, even when Harry and Ron were bent on ridiculing him. The respect was deepened during the height of the war with Voldemort when he had helped turn the tides of the final battle. The blow of his betrayal had been a heavy one because Voldemort had not expected it; Snape had been Voldemort's golden boy after he cast an *Avada Kedavra* on Dumbledore the prior year. Hermione saw him fight for Good on the day of the final battle, and she had gone out of her way to gather and present the proof of it during Snape's trial.

She had always respected him, but it had never crossed her mind to worry about him. After spending more than four full days in his presence, she developed a nagging feeling that he wasn't taking care of himself. He was far too thin, and sometimes, when she caught a fleeting glimpse of his eyes, they were heavy-lidded and just a bit red. She never saw him do anything but work.

However, it was not her place to point out the danger to his health. It would serve only to anger him, and that could possibly lead to her termination. The axe of unemployment was constantly poised over her head, and the stress was beginning to wear her down. Hermione Granger could have gotten a job anywhere she wanted, but her fake name carried no such esteem. She watched each step she made with Snape because he had an explosive temper and low tolerance for behavior that deviated from what he dictated. Hermione thought it was astoundingly unfair, but knew it was something she would have to deal with in order to keep her job.

Regardless of what she wanted to admit, she was upset that he had not even thanked her for her help during his trial. Had she not testified on his behalf with the evidence she had found, then he would most likely be in Azkaban or completely exiled from the magical world. A simple show of gratitude wasn't too much to ask, in her opinion. Apparently, Professor Snape thought differently.

It was Friday, and Hermione had decided to celebrate with a Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks. She certainly deserved it after a tense first week working for her former professor. She laid the money for her food and drink on the tabletop and slowly made her way outside. The sun was out, and, despite the cold temperature, it was a beautiful day. She pulled her cloak tighter around her body and hurried back to Snape's cottage. If she got a few minutes' head start on the potions for this afternoon, then she might be able to leave before five o'clock today. She didn't have any special plans for the weekend, but that didn't stop her from wanting to get home to her own makeshift lab in her kitchen. She did not dare experiment in his laboratory.

As always, the cottage was quiet when she arrived. No one ever visited him, and Hermione wondered if he was lonely or if he had visitors after hours when she left. The place was becoming familiar to her now, even after just a week of working there. She did not presume to enter any of the rooms besides the ones necessary to get to the laboratory. The kitchen was beyond the dining room. She knew it was there, but had never been in it. The only other two rooms in the cottage were behind closed doors in the hall. One was most likely his office, and the other had to be his bedroom. Snape would hang her before firing her if she dared to invade his privacy, so she did not even think of entering them.

The lab was eerily still when she stepped inside. Right away Hermione knew that something was amiss. Snape was gone, and his cauldron was on the floor with the fledgling potion splashed across the stone. Luckily, the base of the potion appeared to have been water, and not much had been added to increase the volatility of the brew. With a quick sweep of her wand, she cleared the mess away. Hermione lifted the cauldron from the floor and sat it on the countertop of the island where Snape always worked.

With a deep, steadying breath, she scanned the floor of the lab and underneath the counters for him. She didn't really think he'd be there, but she was avoiding the creeping fear that foul play was involved. Snape wasn't exactly the most beloved wizard in the country, and he had many enemies on both sides, even after Voldemort's death. He would have never overturned a cauldron and left it on the floor. It wasn't in his nature to be so careless.

Hermione tightened the grip on her wand and carefully edged out into the hall. She strained her ears in an attempt to hear the slightest shuffle of a shoe or cloth, any indication that she was not alone. There was nothing. The hall seemed immeasurably long, and the living area looked dark with all the shutters closed. It was also empty. The dining room was even darker than the living area because it had no windows. The only light it received was from the kitchen. Hermione carefully made her way around the small table and chairs and glanced around the corner into the kitchen.

Snape was hunched over a plate of food. His elbows were on the table, and his head was resting in his open palms. She could see his long fingers laced through his dark hair and the shallow rise and fall of his back as he pulled in breath. The plate in front of him looked like it had not been touched. She couldn't blame him; the food looked sickly and unappetizing.

She disliked him, that was for sure, but at the moment she felt a pang of sympathy for her old professor. Relief was riding the coattails of the sympathy because she had thought him abducted or killed by an enemy. He looked unwell, and Hermione wanted to help. It was in her nature to help those who didn't want it. It went all the way back to her fourth year and the debacle with the house-elves. A part of her still believed they needed her help, even if they would not accept it. She wondered if Snape was the same way. He'd curse her and promptly toss her out on her arse if she told him as much, though.

"Professor?" she called softly, stepping into the kitchen. "Are you well? Can I get you anything?"

"No, Miss Granger. I do not want anything but silence from you," he replied with his face still in his hands. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at her. His eyes were weary and his skin paler than usual.

"Sir, I really think you should eat something. You don't look at all well and some food would "

"I do not need your assistance, Miss Granger." Snape cut her off with a sharp tone and an even sharper glare. "Don't you have work to do, or am I paying you to stand here and watch me eat?"

Hermione was so taken aback by his venom that she hardly knew how to respond. She made a brief, stumbling apology and rushed out of the room. It wasn't until she was back in the empty lab that what had transpired sunk in.

She was always a good student, eager to please her professors and her superiors. Despite her rampant rule-breaking with Harry and Ron, she had respect for the order of things and wanted to follow the rules as long as they seemed fair enough in her eyes. Her first inclination when confronted with Snape was to apologize for whatever slight she may have committed and immerse herself in her work as a way of making up for her indiscretion.

However, as she began gathering the ingredients for her next potion, her mind started stewing over the confrontation in the kitchen. She had merely been concerned for his health, nothing more. He seemed so frail in that moment that she was startled into offering her help, even when she knew he would turn it down. She never thought he would reprimand her so scathingly for her concern. As her mind worked out the details and put her intentions in line with his actions, she became angry.

How dare he be such a bastard when all I wanted to do was help him? A "No, thank you" would have sufficed before he sent me back to my work. There was no reason for his harsh words. The more she thought about Snape's reaction to her concern, the angrier she got. By the time he finally returned to the lab, she had worked herself up into a fine fit.

Hermione whirled around to face him as soon as she heard his footsteps at the door. He stepped into the lab, his robes flowing behind him. He still looked ill, but had pulled himself together somewhat. She suspected he had taken a potion.

"How dare you reprimand me and send me scuttling back to the lab when I was only concerned for your health?" she said, her fingers curled into fists at both her sides, her back straight and her shoulders thrown back in defiance.

"What are you going on about, Miss Granger?" Snape muttered as he resumed his place in front of his cauldron. This turned his back to her and only inflamed her anger further.

Hermione marched around to the other side of the island so she could see his face and he could see hers. "I refuse to tolerate your mood swings, and I think it's deplorable of you to treat me so horribly when I was trying to help you when I was worried about you."

Hermione braced herself for his scathing response. Snape's eyes were thin slits, and his mouth was hard, his lips pressed tightly together. She wondered if she had started an argument that would cost her the job that she had coveted for so long.

Snape's reply never came. She watched as his face slowly softened to its usual hard stare. His eyes never left her face, and he continued to watch her for several seconds before he finally spoke. "Do have respect for your elders, Miss Granger," he said, before averting his eyes and busying his hands with several ingredients on the countertop.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth several times. She had been expecting a vicious argument or her walking papers, not a gentle rebuff and a dismissal from one of the most feared professors to ever teach at Hogwarts. When he didn't acknowledge her again, she snapped her jaw shut and stiffly walked back to her working area. The odd interaction between them was weighing on her mind. It was obvious she had pushed him close to breaking point. He most definitely had wanted to snap at her and knock her down several pegs, but she was unsure why he had not.

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The afternoon slowly dragged by, and, despite the incident after lunch, she finished her assignments for the day several minutes before five o'clock. Snape had been silent for hours. As much as she disliked his company, she longed for conversation and stimulation from a like-minded individual someone who preferred potions to Quidditch and girls. She adored her two best friends, but they were sorely lacking in the conversation department.

As she cleaned up, she tossed glances over her shoulder. Snape's full concentration was focused on the potion in front of him. The cauldron was small, but the ingredients were many. She counted over seventeen laid out on the countertop, and that wasn't even including the ones he had already stirred into the brew. Hermione wanted to ask him about the potion and its properties. *If he didn't fire me for my outburst this morning, then perhaps I can get away with asking about a potion every now and again* she thought.

Hermione softly cleared her throat and clasped her hands behind her back. "I've finished my work, Professor," she said, walking over to stand beside him.

Snape grunted in acknowledgement and threw in what looked like a stone of some sort.

"If you don't mind my asking, sir, what is this potion? I've been trying to match the ingredients to known potions, but haven't had any luck thus far."

Snape's eyes tracked across the ingredients and finally lifted to watch her face. "You've finished your work?"

"Yes, sir."

He gave a slight nod and stepped aside, offering the spot in front of the cauldron to her with a small gesture of his hand. "It's a lust potion."

Hermione didn't move from her position. Snape gestured again, almost impatiently. "Go on," he finally said. "You may as well learn it, as I'm sure you will need to brew it yourself."

Her response was nearly instantaneous. Hermione's cheeks burned, and she opened her mouth in indignation. "Sir, if you are implying that I would sink so low as to administer a lust potion to "

She barely heard Snape's soft chuckle, but when she did, she broke off her sentence right away. He walked around the island and pulled a stool up to face her from the other side. With a weary sigh, he sat down and brushed his hair back from his face. "I was not implying anything of the sort, Miss Granger. The potion is one of the more lucrative items I offer. You are my employee, and it is only natural that I would require you to brew and bottle it for sale."

"Oh." Hermione's voice was small and her face was still red, but this time from embarrassment. "Forgive me for my presumption then, Professor."

He waved her apology away and pointed at the three beetles on the table. "When the potion turns yellow, you will need to add all their wings. Immediately after, and before stirring, you will need to add the seawater from the cup next to the beetles. Slowly stir for three minutes, and then let it sit for another ten."

Hermione was nearly jumping out of her skin with excitement. This was real potion-making, not basic stuff like what he had been making her do up until now. She had never made a lust potion before, so it was new to her. She carefully watched the liquid in the cauldron as it slowly shifted from a murky white to a bright yellow. She quickly divested the dead beetles of their wings and placed them on top of the boiling potion while her other hand reached for the cup of seawater, which was carefully measured by the line on the side of the container. Once she added it the potion became much more active. The yellow shifted into multiple shades of color as Hermione slowly stirred it.

Even though she was concentrating on the potion, she could still feel Snape's eyes on her, watching her like he had watched her weeks ago during her audition, as he liked to call it. She preferred to call it a practical interview. He seemed different this afternoon, and was almost being nice to her. It was a refreshing change, but it was also disconcerting. Hermione had found her footing and her routine with the Snape that she had been forced to deal with during this week, but she was not sure where she stood with this different Snape the one teaching her how to brew a complicated potion that he had started. She doubted Snape had ever let anyone finish one of his own creations.

The three minutes of stirring were nearly up and she carefully sat the stirring rod beside the cauldron. "Lower the heat just a bit," Snape said. He was watching her with his face cradled in his right hand and his elbow propped on the table. He looked more relaxed than she had ever seen him. He also looked exhausted. *Maybe he's nicer when he's tired. In that case, someone should slip him something to give him insomnia.* Hermione felt bad for the thought right away because it looked like Professor Snape didn't need any help with insomnia. He was probably well acquainted with it already. Even she had her periods of bad dreams about all those years lived in unrest and terror of Voldemort.

Just as she lowered the fire beneath the cauldron, Snape stood and gathered a journal and several large reference books from a drawer across the room. He carried them back to his spot across from her, and sat down again. She watched as he spread his work out and took up a quill to note the day and time in the journal. From the angle she had, she was unable to read anything on his paper, but she did watch him flip through one of the books and stop on a page that named the most effective ingredients in restorative potions. Her curiosity was almost unbearable, but she thought asking him any more about his work would be pushing her luck one step too far. Instead, she watched the potion and dared only brief glances at him.

He carefully transcribed something from the text into his journal. A long strand of hair had fallen in his face, and Hermione caught herself wanting to lean across the table and tuck it behind his ear. The thought startled her, and she shook her head to clear her mind of it. He was always so intense when he worked that she found it intimidating to be around him, even though she herself worked much the same way.

"Watch the potion and not me, Miss Granger," Snape said in a low voice that made her jump. "That's next." He used his quill to point to the ingredient. "Once you've added it, you'll need to stir continually for fifteen minutes."

Hermione did as she was told, and she forced her attention back to the potion and away from her employer. Stirring a potion had always been soothing to her, even as a child. It was a way to focus her attention, but to also let her mind wander. Her best ideas came while she was stirring.

Silence had descended upon the room again. The only sound was Snape's quill scratching against the parchment as he bent low over the journal and wrote furiously. After a moment of fervent writing, he left the quill in the inkstand and flipped the pages of one of the books. His long fingers turned page after page, and Hermione found it almost as hypnotic as her stirring.

She finally broke herself out of the trance and cleared her throat again. "Professor, I'd just like to say that I appreciate the trust you've placed in me to complete this potion. I look forward to any other potions that you may want to pass along to me, and I promise to complete them to your... exacting standards."

Snape raised his eyebrow and looked up to look at her. "Exacting standards?" he repeated.

Hermione wanted to smile, but she was afraid that it would ruin the moment. "Yes, sir," she replied with a straight face.

"I would hope so." He returned his attention to the textbook in front of him, and began flipping the pages again, swiftly scanning each for some bit of information that was still a mystery to her.

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She finished the potion just after seven o'clock, and Snape dismissed her for the evening just as he had always done. Instead of going home to seethe over the injustice of using her mind for menial potion-making, she threw herself on her bed and smiled.

Maybe things are going to be fine after all. Maybe Snape really is willing to teach me his art and even recommend me to another Potions Master. Of course, he would be the ideal person to apprentice under, but I've never heard of him taking an apprentice.

Her thoughts were both frantic and calm. She had enjoyed the evening greatly, but did not want to show her full enthusiasm to Snape for fear that he would become annoyed with her exuberance and cut off any further lessons. The last thing she wanted to do was stop them before they really started. Her mind was hungry for the practical knowledge of how to brew the complicated potions she had read about in textbooks and academic journals so many times. She knew that teaching herself from books would only go so far.

Hermione resolved to weather his mood swings and grumpy behavior in the hope that perseverance on her end would lead to a more willing professor to show her the ins and outs of advanced potions.

Author's Note: Snarkyroxy has been the best beta ever. She deserves all the credit I can give her. Jessica and Allyness have been extra helpful as well. As for the updating, I'm trying to get two chapters in every seven days. I promise I am not withholding chapters that are ready to be posted. All of them get a final once-over by me before I submit them.

A Taste for the Art

Chapter 5 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

Hermione doubted her sanity and instinct for self-preservation when she arrived at Professor Snape's house. It was Saturday morning, and she had no reason or right to

knock on his door. She worked Monday through Friday, not weekends. However, after the smashing success of the previous night, she couldn't bring herself to stay away. Her zeal for potions was renewed, and she spent her Friday evening after work modifying the ingredients of the lust potion Snape had taught her. If he was still in such a generous mood, then she was certainly going to take advantage of it.

As she did every morning, Hermione rapped lightly on the door before reaching for the doorknob. The telltale flicker of the ward recognized and admitted her. She was surprised that it worked today, suspecting Snape may have created a ward that only allowed her entrance on workdays.

The cottage was just as quiet as it was every day. She went immediately to the lab and saw Snape in his usual spot bent over a book. He didn't bother to look up, but he did acknowledge her. "Have you lost your mind, Miss Granger? It's Saturday."

Hermione cleared her throat and clasped her hands together in front of herself. "I am aware of that, sir. I just thought... I mean, I thought that...."

"Thought that what, Miss Granger?" he said as he finally lifted his gaze to look at her. He looked exhausted with dark circles bruising the skin below his eyes.

She tossed her head back to throw her worrisome hair out of the way. "I thought that you might like some help, Professor."

"Help?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. You see, I love potion making, but my laboratory at home is lacking. Your lab is... well, it's rather wonderful, and I don't mind spending my free time here. I'm not expecting payment for any hours I work on the weekends." Snape raised a brow as she continued, "I would never presume to conduct my own personal research here, just potions you deem appropriate, ones for the *Terminus Est* line, perhaps?"

Hermione held her breath as he stared at her for a long moment. It wasn't until then that she realized he wasn't wearing his normal attire. It was surprising it had taken her this long to see that his frock coat was absent, and he was only wearing a pair of black trousers with a white, button-up dress shirt. His voice finally jolted her out of her thoughts. "Get a small cauldron and repeat the potion from last night."

Yes! Hermione thought. She tried desperately to suppress her triumphant grin and do as she was told. It took her several minutes to recall and gather all of the correct ingredients. This was her chance to impress Professor Snape, and she most certainly did not want to blow it by forgetting an important part of the potion.

The sunlight slanted through the narrow windows near the ceiling. She could see the dust in the air dance along the beams of light and finally settle on the floor. When she turned her attention back to the work at hand, she found that Snape was watching her. His undivided attention made her nervous, so she darted her eyes around the room again, finally landing on his open journal. There were multiple columns of ingredients listed, but his handwriting was far too small to decipher from where she was standing.

"What are you working on, Professor?" she blurted out without thinking. Her intention was only to end the uncomfortable silence.

"That's really none of your business, Miss Granger," he replied, sliding the journal further away from her and returning to the textbook in front of him.

Hermione mumbled a soft apology and set to work on the potion. She fumbled a bit at first because Snape had started the potion the previous day, not her. However, after she got past the rough spot, she recalled the steps with exceeding ease. It wasn't all that hard to do, but it did require precision and perfect timing. Most people didn't have the knack for potion making that she did, which was why most people didn't make their own potions.

She stirred the brew and watched Snape out of the corner of her eye. He was compiling a list of ingredients. If it weren't for the textbook, she would have thought it was a shopping list. The book made her think he was researching ingredients for a possible new potion designed by him. Hermione had been dabbling in this herself, and she itched to ask him about his work again.

"Forgive me, Professor, but can you really not tell me what you are working on? It looks so interesting," she finally said.

Snape answered without even looking up from the page. "It is a personal project of mine, Miss Granger, and is therefore of no concern to you."

His voice hadn't been too angry or annoyed, so Hermione dared to push him a bit further after allowing a few seconds of silence to pass. "A new potion, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Snape said.

"My heart really is in research and development. That's actually why I was looking for a position as an assistant in a private potions lab. The Ministry's potions department is respectable, but it is wrapped up in regulation of existing potions." Hermione looked up to determine if Snape was annoyed or even listening. His head was down as if he was reading the text, but he had not stopped her from talking. She decided to continue. He would have no qualms about telling her to shut her mouth when he'd had enough of her chatter, of that she was sure.

"My laboratory at home is rather small. Actually, it isn't really a lab. It's more like my kitchen. I've taken to eating on the sofa because my dining table is covered with notes and cauldrons." Hermione stopped and took a breath before continuing. "I want you to know that I really do appreciate this job. I absolutely refuse to use my real name when applying for positions, and that makes it much harder to break into any field where I have no post-graduate experience, especially potions."

Snape gave no indication that he was listening except for his continued silence and the fact that he had yet to turn another page of the text. Surely he had finished with the paragraph on the properties of lizard tails.

Hermione braced herself and asked again. "Can you really not tell me what it is you are working on, Professor?"

He slowly raised his head to look at her again before carefully placing his quill in the inkwell. "It's a restorative potion, a healing potion, if you will."

"What does it do?" she asked.

"Nothing as of yet. My intention was to administer it to long-term coma patients who have fallen into a vegetative state. It is meant to reactivate their brains."

Hermione was surprised. She had expected some dubious potion of questionable ethical value that he could sell to wizards with too much money and too much time on their hands. The last thing she expected was a healing potion to return coma victims to a functioning state. "Much luck, sir?"

Snape smirked wryly and shook his head before returning to his work. "Not at all, Miss Granger."

"You know, I read this article not but a few months back in *Potions Master* that speculated as to the use of a herb called gotu kola in restoring the functions of a damaged brain."

"And who wrote that article?" Snape asked in a low voice.

Hermione frowned as she tried to recall the name. She tossed in the next ingredient and stirred the potion twice before sitting the rod aside for the moment. "I believe his name was William Malrubius."

Snape lifted an eyebrow in her direction before returning to his work. The gesture was curious to Hermione, but she wasn't sure exactly what it meant. He certainly was being amiable today. Maybe she had finally broken through the exterior and was now getting to know the real Snape. Maybe he was actually thinking of her as Hermione Granger and not Harry Potter's friend.

She puzzled over his reaction to the article as she continued brewing the potion. It wasn't until she was adding the last ingredient that it hit her. She nearly laughed aloud.

Snape had more than one pseudonym, apparently. Not only was he S. Jonas, but he was also William Malrubius in his more academic endeavors.

Hermione cleared her throat to gain his attention again. "I believe this batch is finished... Mr. Malrubius." She couldn't help but grin at him.

Snape caught her eyes for a brief moment, and she thought that she saw her humor mirrored in his eyes. "Indeed," he said.

In an effort not to push him too far, she bottled the potion in silence and carefully labeled each bottle. Once she began placing them in a small box, she could hold her tongue no longer.

"Have you considered using wormwood or wormwood extract to boost the healing powers of gotu kola?"

The soft scratch of Snape's quill didn't miss a beat. "I have," he said. "However, I have discovered that a small amount of ginseng works much better. The acidity in wormwood is counterproductive, and it actually decreases the strength of the gotu kola."

"Then you just need to counteract that acidity with something to give the wormwood balance so it can work as the activator in the potion," Hermione said. The potion bottles were boxed up, and she slipped onto a stool beside her. "Perhaps milkweed? I've had a great deal of luck with it in my own work. It seems to provide the counter needed."

Snape finally raised his eyes and looked at her. He seemed interested and slightly surprised. Hermione had expected to see annoyance on his face, but it was nowhere to be found. "Milkweed would indeed have that effect on the wormwood, but when mixed with gotu kola, it can be extremely volatile. It would do the patient more harm than good."

Hermione frowned. She desperately wanted to show him that she was worth his time, and that she had the intelligence necessary to understand his work, but he seemed to cut her off at every pass. At least he wasn't being a prat about it. For Snape, he was being downright nice. "I'm afraid I don't know all that much about gotu kola. It's a relatively new herb to the market. The vast majority of my knowledge on the herb actually came from your article."

"At least someone is reading my academic papers," he said, placing the quill back in the inkwell and folding his hands in front of him. He was offering her his full, undivided attention. "Potions isn't exactly one of the more glamorous professions, and the only wizards who read *Potions Master* are ones who are set in their ways and don't want to hear about any new research." He paused for a moment before continuing. "The field has become very stagnant in the last few years."

"But, Professor, you seem to have the knowledge and the experience to trail blaze in the development field. Why don't you spend more time doing so?"

Snape raised a brow. "I thought that's what I was doing. I *did* hire you to do my grunt work."

"Oh," Hermione said softly.

"As I was saying, the potions field has become rather stagnant, especially in Europe. Most masters spend their time refining existing potions, not investigating new avenues of development; therefore they have no interest in those of us who do have a taste for the research, the..."

"Art," Hermione said, finishing his sentence.

Snape gave a single nod. "Yes, the art of creating something out of virtually nothing. Of course, the ingredients are *something*, but they would amount to nothing if not combined correctly in the proper order and quantity. Unfortunately, most masters are content to go through the motions."

Hermione was astounded. She had never expected a discussion like this with Snape, of all people. He had never given her any indication of his passion for the subject of research. She considered him a very by-the-book individual one who prided himself on efficiency and quality, not imagination and ingenuity. Then again, she couldn't see any reason why he shouldn't be all of those things. Viewing him as just her Hogwarts professor was looking at him through very one-dimensional glasses. He was much more than her professor, and she was really beginning to understand that now.

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Hermione didn't feel like it was late, but the clock on the shelf above the door told her that it was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon. She had been talking with Professor Snape for hours. Their discussion was regulated to potions, but that didn't mean it was any less enjoyable to her. Snape noted her eyes on the clock and nodded toward the door. "I suggest you run off and enjoy the remainder of your weekend, Miss Granger."

She smiled at him. "I'm so sorry for monopolizing your time like this, Professor. I know you're working on this personal project of yours, and I shouldn't have invaded and distracted you, but I find your research fascinating, and I would love to assist you, even if it is done during weekends."

"I would have not been distracted if I had not wanted to be distracted. Even I understand the concept of taking a step back to look at the bigger picture."

"The bigger picture?" Hermione asked.

"What I would like to accomplish beyond this one potion." He looked as if he was going to say something else, but he abruptly stopped himself and stood from his seat.

"And about my assisting you in your research after hours?" she asked.

"I'll take it under advisement. Go on," he told her. "I've other things to do today. I don't have endless hours to entertain you with conversation."

His words may have been harsh, but they didn't come out as such. She thanked him again before retrieving her bag and leaving the house. She was brimming with happiness as she closed her eyes and Apparated back to her flat.

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*Author's Note: A huge thanks goes out to Snarkyroxy for being the best beta a girl could ask for. I'd also like to thank Jessica and Allyness for their help as well. I'm glad everyone who has been reading this fic is enjoying it, and I hope all of you stay with me until the end.*

## Back to Square One

Chapter 6 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

## Chapter 6: Back to Square One

Her small bag was stuffed with books, but that wasn't unusual. She spent most of Sunday scouring her personal library for potions texts that contained any mention of potions or ingredients that would shed light on the difficult potion Professor Snape was trying to perfect. Her hopes were high at the onset of the search, but with a lack of applicable information in the first three textbooks, she trudged through the remainder with a dampened spirit. She did not find anything astounding or surprising. Most of the pieces of information she culled were bits that she would have remembered offhand, anyway.

Nevertheless, she packed all of the books with even small pieces of information into her bag and toted them to work with her on Monday morning. Her idea was to impress Snape with her dedication and passion for research. Even if nothing in the books was able to shed any light on the potion, he would still see she wanted to help and was willing to spend her free time researching for or with him. Saturday was wonderful, and she hoped that many of her Saturdays in the future would be spent in amiable and insightful conversation with Professor Snape. His company was enjoyable as long as he refrained from the horrible insults and vicious commands at every turn.

He was slicing a root beside his cauldron when she walked into the lab. She swung the bag onto the countertop across from him and bid him a good morning. "Do you ever stop working?" Hermione asked him with a smile.

"Do you ever stop asking questions?" he shot back in the usual tone that warned of his annoyance.

Hermione faltered, but brushed the tone of voice off on his morning grumpiness. Things would be better once she got him talking; she was sure of it. "I've brought you some books. I'm sure you have most of them, but I have marked the appropriate pages in my copies."

Snape stopped slicing and looked up at her. He appeared utterly exhausted. Despite the lively conversation on Saturday, she had to admit that he looked nearly as bad then as he did this morning. His skin was so pale it was nearly translucent. His eyes were red and the dark circles were still beneath them.

Hermione pulled her eyes away from him and concentrated on pulling the books out. "I did a bit of research yesterday about the potion you've been working on. Two heads are better than one, right?"

"I never agreed to your assistance on this endeavor, nor do I believe I need it. Put your silly books away and purge those thoughts from your mind. I hired you to brew potions at my request. As such, your list is next to the cauldron over there." He pointed a long finger over his shoulder at her usual spot. There was a fresh piece of parchment beside the black cauldron.

Hermione felt her stomach drop. *So, we're back to square one then*, she thought. His voice was cold and clinical. There was none of the subdued passion of Saturday when he had been discussing his research. After getting a glimpse of that side of him, it was all the more difficult to endure this one. She felt he was putting on an act for her in an effort to push her away from his research, and Hermione was not sure why he felt it necessary.

"Sir, I would never think of neglecting my daily duties. I simply want the opportunity to assist in your research. I..."

"That's quite enough, Miss Granger," Snape said, cutting her off and returning to the sliced root in front of him. "Put your text books away and begin your work. I don't want to hear any more of your foolish ideas."

She opened her mouth to respond, but a sharp glare from his dark eyes made the retort wither away in her throat. Hermione shoved the books back in the satchel with stiff, jerky movements and walked over to her workstation with as much dignity as she could muster. At that moment she found him the foulest, cruelest, most detestable man on the planet. She thought it no wonder that he never had visitors. No one liked associating with a stubborn, hateful, man and he was very much that.

In an effort to calm herself and keep her mind on the task at hand, she made a conscious effort to think only of the potion in her cauldron. Thinking of Snape and his temperament that ran lukewarm and cold would only serve to stir her up into anger or self-pity. Anger that he was such a horrible prat to her and self-pity that she had to endure his moods.

She took lunch at the usual time, but he did not give her as much as a nod of acknowledgement when she excused herself. Apparently, she wasn't even worth a cordial gesture or word when she left the room. After their extended conversation on Saturday, she believed she had earned at least that from him. It was obvious that he did not share her thoughts on the subject.

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The Three Broomsticks was fairly busy, and Hermione found herself jostled through the door with several other patrons eager to grab a bite to eat. Just after she had ordered and opened the Arithmancy book she had brought with her, she saw Ginny Weasley enter the room. By some unspoken connection forged from going through so much together, they locked eyes simultaneously. Ginny beamed a huge smile at her and hurried over to the table.

"Hermione! I didn't expect to see you here. Ron says you're working for Snape," Ginny said, giving Hermione a quick embrace.

Hermione gestured to a chair across from her, and Ginny sat down. "Yes, I am. He has a place on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. It's a nice walk here, and I can unwind after the morning's work. How have you been?"

"Good. St. Mungo's is busy, but that's nothing new, really. The cutbacks on the staff have put a strain on us. People retire, but the Ministry never sees fit to approve new Healers to fill their positions."

Hermione smiled. "They're lucky they have you around. You probably do the work of three people each day."

"Don't I wish it were possible, though? How is it working with... Snape?" Ginny said his name with equal parts reservation and disgust. Professor Snape did not have many admirers, and, at the moment, Hermione couldn't find it within herself to feel sorry for him at all. He was certainly reaping what he had sown.

She shrugged. "It's tolerable. I'm sure that it will look great on my resume."

"Is he still..."

"Horrible?" Hermione asked. "Without a doubt. He hasn't changed one bit since school." She stopped herself when she remembered Saturday. "Actually, sometimes he's a pleasure to be around, but those times are few and far between."

The waitress came to take Ginny's order before leaving them alone to resume their conversation. "So, are you dating anyone? I asked Ron, but you know how he is. If it doesn't involve him, then he's clueless. Quidditch and girls are the two most important things in his life."

Hermione laughed and took a sip of her pumpkin juice. "I haven't dated anyone since Gavin, and that was over a year ago."

"More than that," Ginny said, disagreeing. "You had that fight at the Valentine's Day party, and that was almost two years ago."

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "Oh, that was so horrible. I wish I could go back and erase the entire incident, and maybe erase Gavin too. It was a car crash just waiting to happen."

The food arrived, and they both began eating. After a few minutes of companionable silence, Ginny took a drink and spoke up again. "We've got this new Healer on staff. It was some special exchange program with the Ministry in France. We sent one of ours there, and they sent one of theirs here. He's... interesting. You should let me set you

up with him."

Hermione nearly dropped her fork. "Like a blind date?"

Ginny was quick to dispel Hermione's thought. "No, not at all. It would just be me introducing the two of you and sending you off to spend some time together."

"No." Hermione's answer was firm and left no room for argument, but that didn't stop Ginny from pursuing the idea.

"He's gorgeous, he's smart, he's single, and his accent is dreamy."

"Ginevra Weasley, I said no and I mean it. You are not setting me up."

Ginny shook her head and went back to her food. She knew there was no way to talk Hermione into something when she was like this. "You really do need to get out more."

"I get out quite enough, thank you," Hermione said hotly, spearing a potato with her fork.

"Ron and Harry say they haven't seen you in over two weeks."

"I've been busy."

"Busy doing Snape's bidding? I think spending too much time with him would kill anyone's social life," Ginny said.

Hermione frowned. She felt the urge to defend her employer, but a large part of her felt he deserved the scathing comments after the way he'd been acting toward her. "I don't want to talk about it, Ginny. I've just been immersed in work lately. I'm not avoiding anyone, really."

"I know." Ginny nodded her head and pushed her food around on the plate. "I really do wish you'd let me introduce you to Robert."

"Robert?"

"The Healer from France."

Hermione frowned a second time. "Thank you, but no thank you. I don't think I'm ready to be thrown to the lions just yet."

"Dating is not a pit of lions, Hermione," Ginny replied with a laugh.

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When Hermione returned to the cottage, she found that it was empty. This came as some surprise since Snape always seemed to be tirelessly working. A small piece of parchment was at her workstation.

*Miss Granger,*

*I'll be out for the remainder of the day. You may leave once all of your potions are completed. The wards to my house are spelled only for your entrance, so refrain from inviting any of your reprehensible friends over to gawk at my private space.*

*S. Snape*

He just couldn't leave a short, neutral message. The jabs and insults had to be thrown in to elevate him above her. She was so frustrated with him that she wanted to scream. How was she to survive as his employee for more than a few weeks if he insisted on acting in such a childish manner?

Her annoyance at the tone of the note ebbed into speculation of where he went and why. All of the potions they had made recently were stored under the counters. She didn't notice any missing, so he couldn't be dropping off an order to one of the apothecaries. Hermione couldn't think of a single person that would desire his company, or one that he would seek out for company. She tried to ignore the small voice in the back of her mind that reminded her that she desired his company at times; not the company from this morning, but the company she found in him over the weekend.

She was beginning to doubt whether he'd act that way with her again. She didn't want to spend all day, every day with a moody Snape when she could have a much more interesting companion in the real Snape who was passionate about knowledge and research.

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His aloofness and cold disposition the day before carried over into Tuesday. Hermione attempted to cajole him into conversation several times before lunch, but he shut her down quite quickly. She was beginning to fall back into her despair over being trapped in a dead end job with an insult monger for a boss. The potions he had given her thus far this week were a step up from the potions of the previous week, but still nothing that challenged her like the lust potion last Friday had. She longed for him to impart that sort of knowledge to her, but it was painfully obvious that he had no intention of doing that whatsoever.

Lunch was uneventful, and Hermione was beginning to wonder if Ginny really was right as she slowly made her way down the path toward Snape's cottage. Perhaps she should get out more. She had only been working for Snape a little over a week, and she had fallen into a rut. Her time was spent at his house or her flat. She never went anywhere except for at lunchtime, and she hadn't seen her friends over two weeks. Her passion for potions had slowly taken over her life, even though she knew it wasn't healthy. *Maybe Ginny's French Healer at St. Mungo's is free for dinner,* Hermione thought. She shook her head and mentally laughed at herself as she arrived at Snape's door. She did not want to go on a date with a French Healer who worked with Ginny. She wanted Snape to be slightly nicer to her and involve her in more exciting potions endeavors. Unfortunately the chances of that happening were dwindling.

Hermione tossed her hair back over her shoulder as she entered the lab. Snape was standing at his cauldron with a small dropper in his hand. The liquid inside was light brown, and it sizzled as it hit the potion in the cauldron. Her eyes trained on his hand while he squeezed a small number of drops out. It was easy to see from her position at the door that his hand was shaking. Snape had the steadiest hands Hermione had ever seen, but at that moment they were trembling uncontrollably so much so that Hermione was afraid he would drop the entire dropper into the brew.

"Are you just going to stand in the doorway, Miss Granger?" Snape said. "I believe there are a number of assignments still on your list."

Despite his violently shaking hand, his voice was still stern and as cold as ever. She removed the concern for him from her head and was careful to avoid stepping near him as she walked over to her work area. This turned her back to him and his trembling hand. For some reason, the sight had affected her greatly. She had gone through her years considering him untouchable. Professor Snape did not shake while making potions; he was always cool and precise with a steady hand and quick reflexes.

Moments after beginning a simple engorgement potion, she heard a gasp from behind her. She whirled around to find Professor Snape backing up from the cauldron. The half-empty jar of mermaid scales in his hand fell to the floor and shattered just as the cauldron bubbled over and quenched the fire burning beneath it. Hermione glanced toward her former professor, but he was standing immobile, watching the scene play out with a stunned expression on his face. When she turned her eyes back to the cauldron, the potion was slowly, but surely, melting the metal of it and dripping onto the floor.

With a quick flourish of her wand, Hermione banished the noxious liquid and deposited the mangled cauldron in the sink. "Sir, are you well?" she asked, walking toward Snape with an extended hand. She meant to touch his shoulder to gain his attention, but he recoiled and swept out of the room before she could.

Hermione considered completing her current potion before seeking him out. She even considered leaving him be and not seeking him out at all. However, she found that she was turning into a glutton for punishment. She continued to come back to Snape for more insults and snide comments in hopes that she would eventually gain his respect.

After placing a quick stasis charm on her potion, she ventured into the house in search of him. If he had retreated to his bedroom or study, then she would leave him. Those were places she had never been invited into and were therefore off limits to her. After only a few moments of searching, she found him in the kitchen. He was seated at the small table with a glass of water in front of him. His forehead was resting in his palm, and his long fingers were threaded through his dark hair.

"What's the matter, Professor?" Hermione asked in a small voice.

"Nothing," he replied in a bland voice. "Leave me be. You have work to do."

This didn't deter her. She stepped into the room and pulled out the chair across from him to sit down. "How long has it been since you've eaten?"

Snape finally pulled his head away from his hand and looked up at her. "What does it matter?"

"I don't think you've been eating properly, Professor. You're exhausted, and your body has no food no fuel to keep it running."

His eyes darkened, and his lips thinned out even more than they usually were. "Mind your own business, Miss Granger. I don't need a nurse. I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. Get out of my kitchen and return to work before I throw you out of my home."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but his chilly look made her think twice. She snapped her jaws shut and left the room without another word being uttered.

Once she was back in the lab, she continued her potion, but her mind was not on her work at all, it was on Professor Snape. He certainly made it difficult for one to care about him or worry about him. He was so mean to those around him that sympathy was near impossible to have. Despite that, Hermione found she worried over his health. She held him in high esteem after the battle had been won and his true intentions had been revealed. She did not want to sit back and watch him ruin himself by overworking and not eating properly, even if he professed to detest her help or sympathy.

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Hermione was unsure of what Snape's reaction would be as she approached his house with the two containers of take-away from the Three Broomsticks. The lunch rush wasn't any more busy than usual, but she had worried over Snape all of Tuesday evening. She rose the next morning determined to help him whether he liked it or not. If he wouldn't go get something to eat on his own, then she would just bring it to him. A simple charm was keeping both containers warm while she carried them back to work.

She quietly entered the cottage and went directly to the kitchen to leave the food. After the plates were arranged on the table across from one another, she ventured back into the laboratory.

"Sir?"

"What now, Miss Granger?" Snape sighed, looking up from his notes.

"Rosmerta's was unusually busy today. I thought it might be better to bring my lunch back here. I got something for you as well." Hermione waited on a response, but got nothing. He dropped his eyes back down to the notes written in his elegant scrawl. She had been expecting annoyance from him, not indifference.

After an awkward moment of standing in the door and waiting for him to acknowledge her again, she went back to the kitchen with her head low. She felt like she was wasting her time, and he would never let her help him. She should have known he would be extremely resistant to even the idea that he didn't know best. *And he calls me a know-it-all*, she thought with a wry smirk on her face.

Hermione sat down in front of her plate of food and took a deep breath. If he hadn't deemed her worthy of his company by the time she finished her lunch, she would put a warming spell on his food and leave it for him. She was fairly sure that he would eat the meal after she left, but would be too stubborn to eat it while she was in the house.

Just as she raised the piece of fish to her lips, he entered the kitchen with his head down and his robes swishing behind him. Hermione had to fight to keep her jaw from dropping to the tabletop. She was definitely not expecting his company for lunch even though she had invited him.

"It's fish," she mumbled, watching him from her side of the table.

Snape made some non-committal noise and sat down across from her. He carefully spread a napkin over his lap before picking up the fork to eat. Silence reigned as they both ate. Hermione kept a close eye on him while he started out slowly, neatly cutting the tender fish with his fork. By the time he was halfway through his meal, Snape was shoveling the food into his mouth like a starving man. He finished several minutes before she did, and his plate was clean of everything, including the garnish on the side.

"You should eat more often, sir," Hermione said softly as she banished the take-away containers with a wave of her wand.

She looked up to see his eyes narrow at her. "I don't need a mother, Miss Granger. There's no need to tell me when or what I should eat."

"I was only "

"I suggest you return to work if you want to finish your daily tasks before nightfall," Snape said, cutting Hermione off.

Hermione stood up so quickly that her chair nearly toppled over. Her fists were clenched tightly at her sides and her face was flushed with anger. *How dare he treat me like this after all that I've done to help him*, she thought as she watched him return her stare impassively. It was like he was daring her to explode.

She reigned in her temper and took a deep, calming breath. "Of course, Professor," Hermione replied through clenched teeth. She stiffly turned and left the kitchen.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in tense silence. Hermione allowed her anger over his rudeness to simmer at the forefront of her mind while she went through the motions of making a simple potion to combat insomnia. She knew that he was aware of her mood, but he made no mention of it. It was like he actually enjoyed having her anger directed at him.

The hours passed fairly quickly, and she suddenly realized that she was bottling her last batch of potions for the day. After a few cleansing charms, she grabbed her bag to leave for the day. She passed by Snape, taking long strides to the door of the room. Pressure on her shoulder made her stop and turn around. He was standing behind her with his slender fingers curled over her shoulder, pressing into the fabric of her blouse. The gesture surprised her so much she could think of nothing else to do but stand before him with her mouth hanging open.

He opened his mouth once, shut it, and then tried to force out sound again. "I don't believe I thanked you for the meal today, Miss Granger," he murmured under his breath, dropping his eyes to dart across the floor of the laboratory.

Hermione was in such shock that she was unable to respond.

"You may go now. We're done for the day." Snape removed his hand from her shoulder and turned around to face the lines of ingredients arranged on the shelves around his lab.

She shook her head and backed out of the room. *Did Snape just thank me?*

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*Author's Note: As always, a big thanks goes out to Snarkyroxy for beta-ing this fic. Thanks also go out to Allyness and Jessica for offering their eyes as well. Just to remind everyone who may be wondering this fic *is* finished. It is fifteen chapters in total, and I've promised to post two chapters a week.*

## <i>You're</i> Asking for <i>My</i> Opinion?

Chapter 7 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

### Chapter 7: *You're Asking for My Opinion?*

On Friday morning when Hermione opened the envelope with her week's pay inside, she saw it held more Galleons than had been agreed upon when she accepted the position. "Sir, I believe you miscounted. There are eight additional Galleons here," she said, turning to face Snape.

As always, he was hunched over his cauldron. He had all but tossed the envelope in her direction before resuming his work that morning when she'd arrived. Snape didn't even bother to turn around when he replied, "It is repayment for the meals you insisted on bringing me each day."

"Oh, but sir, that's really not necessary. I only wanted to help "

"That's quite enough, Miss Granger," Snape said, effectively cutting Hermione's explanation short. "I'd prefer to pay for my own meals. The Galleons are yours; keep them. I don't want to hear any more discussion on this. I believe you have work to do."

Hermione opened her mouth again, but thought better of it and snapped it shut. He certainly ran hot and cold, or at least lukewarm and cold. Something nice or thoughtful always had to be balanced with cruel words or annoyance. He never opened up without clamming shut afterward. It was beginning to drive her mad to be around someone so utterly unpredictable in his treatment of her. She decided to keep the money and not bring the subject up again. It appeared to be something he preferred not to talk about, and she would respect his wishes.

The morning went by fairly quickly, and Hermione returned shortly after noon with their meals. As had become routine, Snape followed her into the kitchen, and they sat down for a quiet lunch together. They rarely spoke during lunch, but Hermione enjoyed the peaceful cottage and Snape's company, silent though it was. The birds tittered outside the kitchen window, and the sunlight cast a soft glow in the otherwise dim kitchen. The clanking of silverware had become a comforting sound to Hermione. It reminded her of these peaceful lunches with a most unlikely companion.

The stew Rosmerta sent with her was wonderful, but Hermione nearly choked on it when Snape cleared his throat to speak. "I'm quite interested in the theories you put forth in your article on cell growth, Miss Granger. As you know, I have been working on a potion for patients in comas, and I believe that the information in your article could be of some use if expounded on."

It took her a moment to orient herself to the invitation for conversation that had suddenly sprung from Snape's lips. "I agree, sir. If we can provide a stable way to grow new brain cells with the help of a potion, then it can most certainly be modified to stimulate existing brain cells or supplement them with new cells."

"It would depend on the type and extent of the patient's injury," he replied.

Hermione furrowed her brows and dropped her spoon into the bowl of stew. "Wait," she said, "you're talking about my article."

He raised his brows in question. "Indeed, I am."

"You've read my article?"

"I have."

A huge smile rapidly grew on Hermione's face. "You've read my article." This time it was a statement, brimming with pride.

Snape's lips turned up slightly. "Yes."

"But how "

He waved off her question with a graceful hand and leant back in his chair. "I read the article several weeks before we met in The Four Winds Café, but I did not connect the author's name to the Jane Wharton I was meeting for a job interview. When I realized that you were her, Miss Granger, I easily connected the dots."

"You read my article," she repeated, unable to stop smiling.

"Hush with your silly nonsense, girl. As I was saying, I know all of the researchers in the field of potions, and they never publish under pseudonyms. They want all the fame they can receive from their academic circles. That meant the author would have to be a former student of mine. While I have had a few worthwhile students pass through my classroom in the past, none of them were capable of an article like that, none of them except for you, Miss Granger. It only made sense that you would be Jane Wharton. I should have realized before I even scheduled the interview."

She felt giddy. *None of them were capable of an article like that, none of them except for you.* That sounded like a compliment if she ever heard one. "Did you just compliment me and my article, Professor?" she asked with a grin.

Snape tossed his napkin on his empty plate and stood. "Don't let your head grow too big, Miss Granger. I found several miscalculations in your theories on cell growth."

Hermione stood up as well because she was having difficulty controlling her excitement. She continued in a breathless voice, "Even so, sir, I would love to talk with you about my theories on the subject. I find that no one else is interested in discussing it with me, or they are unable to because their knowledge of potions is rudimentary. Perhaps you might consider allowing me to assist with that potion you're making? I'm confident that I could bring a fresh perspective to your research, and it would mean a great deal to me to have the opportunity to experiment and develop a ground-breaking potion with someone such as yourself." Hermione's hands were clasped tightly in



front of her stomach as she waited expectantly for his reaction.

Several long seconds ticked by before Snape gave a brief nod of his head. "The majority of my personal research is done on the weekends. If you are so interested in this project, then you will have to participate on Saturday or Sunday."

She nodded her head vigorously. "I'd be more than happy to spend my weekends researching with you. It really is a passion of mine, sir. There is nothing else I'd rather be doing."

Snape's dark eyes held her brown ones for a brief moment. "Very well, Miss Granger, I'll see you tomorrow."

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Hermione felt like she was looking at something sacred. Professor Snape's journals and notations from his experiments were laid out in front of her. The books had scraps of parchment jutting out between the pages and notes cluttering the margins. At first glance it looked disorganized and haphazard, but as she began her explorations of the information, she realized that it was quite tidy and very much in order. It looked like years of work reduced to a pile of crumpled parchment papers with a few select books.

She felt slightly uncomfortable even touching it. It was obvious that a great deal of Snape's life was in this research. Some of the notes and experiments dated back to when she was only a child and knew nothing of magic. It came as a surprise to her that he allowed her to look through his notes at her leisure.

When Hermione arrived that morning he swept her into his office and told her to take a seat at his desk. He placed the stack of research materials in front of her with a suggestion that she review it. He said that she would be of no help if she was not aware of his past research and avenues of experimentation. Most of her Saturday had been spent devouring his personal notes and the content of the few books he deemed appropriate for her crash course in the investigation of a cure for coma victims.

By late afternoon she realized she had not eaten anything since breakfast. She rubbed the blurriness from her strained eyes and walked across the hall to the laboratory. Snape was standing at the island, facing the door. His hands were resting on the table, and he was staring at a pile of herbs Hermione did not recognize. He appeared to be lost in thought, and he had not heard her enter the room.

She cleared her throat and spoke up. "Your notes are interesting, sir. I'm honored that you allowed me the pleasure of reading them."

Snape looked up, and she watched his eyes slowly focus in on her. He looked exhausted and somewhat lost. He really wasn't taking proper care of himself, and it was painfully evident by his thin, undernourished body, the dark circles bruising the skin beneath his eyes, and the haunted look in those eyes when she caught him unaware.

When he didn't reply, she spoke again. "Is that gotu kola?" Hermione gestured to the herb on the countertop.

He glanced down at the pile of leaves and shook his head. "No, it's mint my own variation that does not affect the properties of a potion, but masks the bad taste."

"Well, if it isn't working there is no need to make it taste better, and I'm sure someone in a coma wouldn't care one way or the other what it tastes like," she said, sliding onto a stool across from him.

"Yes, I suppose so," he said. Snape gave his head a quick shake, and she could see him visibly pull himself together. "You've read the notes on the research I've done?"

"Yes, sir."

"And? Do you have any thoughts, Miss Granger?" His tone was sharper than she liked, and it provoked her into responding in the same voice.

"Of course I have *thoughts*, Professor. I never thought I'd see the day when *you* asked for *my* opinion."

"Nor did I, Miss Granger. Desperate times call for desperate measures, of which you are one."

"I'm a desperate measure in this research?"

He plucked a small leaf from the stem of the herb and tossed it into the cauldron beside him. "Of course you are. As much as I hate to admit it, Miss Granger, I have run out of options, and I'm also running out of time. I've been attempting to develop this potion for many years, but to no avail. I'm afraid I need a fresh set of eyes to look at things from a different perspective."

"Why me?"

"Must I have a reason?"

"There are several masters who would be willing to offer their opinion to someone of your expertise," Hermione said.

Snape nodded. "Yes, and we've already had this discussion about those masters, Miss Granger. Most are old, set in their ways, and have no desire or drive for true research and development. Their opinions mean nothing to me because I already know all they can tell me."

"You certainly have a high opinion of yourself," she said.

He caught and held her eyes with his own. "I'm being realistic, Miss Granger. I have been doing this since before you were born, and we both know my knowledge of potions is extensive, or else you wouldn't have begged for this position. I know you certainly didn't press the issue because you wanted to work with the greasy git."

"I never called you that!" Hermione exclaimed. "I always defended you when anyone called you names. I've always had respect for you. I've always trusted you."

"I seem to recall an incident in your first year when you and your bothersome friends thought that I was searching for the Philosopher's Stone."

She rolled her eyes. "I was twelve. I didn't know anything at the time. You were intimidating and mean to all the Gryffindors. What was I supposed to think?"

Snape abruptly turned around and snatched a jar from the shelf behind him. "Perhaps it would be best if we avoided discussion of the past."

"I agree," Hermione said. "What really matters is where we are now and what we can do about it. If you'd like my *fresh* perspective on the potion, I believe that the first step would be to identify all potential ingredients and thoroughly catalog them as to their properties and what other ingredients they interact with in either positive or negative ways. Once we have a complete list, we can try each combination to find a stable potion."

"I've already done that."

"Yes, you did it fifteen years ago. You're the one who said that all Potions Masters are stuck in the past. I think the problem is that you're focusing too much on one or two key ingredients and not looking at the larger picture."

Snape looked angry as he replaced the lid on the jar and slammed it back onto the countertop. "And what are these new and mysterious ingredients that you seem to think I've missed?"

"May I use your books?" Hermione nodded in the direction of the bookcase at the far end of the room.

He threw an arm out. "By all means, I couldn't possibly keep a bookworm like you away from them."

Hermione was trembling slightly from the confrontation. Confrontation was easy if she was the angry one, but dealing with an angry Snape while retaining her cool was more intimidating than she'd originally thought. She ran her finger over the spines of the books until she found what she was looking for: *Essential Components to Restorative and Healing Potions*.

She returned to her seat and opened the book, thumbing through the chapters that she knew would be of no use to them. He certainly seemed to be obsessed with this potion. Years of constantly studying and attempting to develop a potion like this made her think that it was not simply a hobby, but a mission, and his wild emotions made her think that the mission was a personal one. She suspected that the poor condition of his health was due to his unflagging obsession with this avenue of research. All of his free time appeared to be devoted to creating a stable version of the potion, making him neglect his body, mind, and the world around him.

Hermione felt a small twinge in her heart for him. He was desperate for a cure, and he was destroying himself in the process of trying to find it. She wished she knew why he was so intent on this particular potion.

"Here," Hermione said. "This chapter has several ingredients that we may want to consider." She tapped the page as Snape walked around the table to look over her shoulder. Despite his appearance, she found that he smelled very good as he hovered over her, scanning the pages of the book. She hadn't been this close to Snape since her fifth year at Hogwarts when he used to lean over the students to see the contents of their cauldrons. She suddenly felt like a very self-conscious fifteen-year-old.

Hermione shook the silly thoughts from her head when he started speaking again. "I've considered all of these in my previous research, as you saw in my notes. They are either ineffective or too difficult to include in such a potion. Gotu kola has been the only one I've found to be truly feasible."

"What has been your trouble with the gotu kola?" she asked.

Snape leaned closer to get a better view of the page. His breath was warm on her ear when he replied. "It reacts badly with many of the commonly used ingredients meant to boost its power and effectiveness. I'm always left with a potion that is too unstable and volatile to administer to a patient, or a potion that does not have the proper strength."

If only I could find a guy that would whisper potions research in my ear like that she thought while she suppressed her giggles. Hermione tried to sober herself because it was certainly not the time for flights of fancy about the perfect man, especially when that man possessed Snape's voice and knowledge. She was spending far too much time around him if she found any part of him desirable.

"Perhaps gotu kola is not the ingredient you need to create a successful potion. There are over a hundred known ingredients for restorative potions and those can be combined with other ingredients to boost effectiveness. The potential number of combinations is mind-boggling," she said, turning the page twice more to show him the extensive list of ingredients they should be cataloging.

She felt a rush of air as he pulled away from her and returned to his workstation. "Are you questioning my research, Miss Granger?"

Hermione wasn't sure what to say. "Well, no, sir, I'm not questioning the validity of your research. I'm sure it is quite thorough and comprehensive. I'm just afraid that you've narrowed your possible ingredients down to too few. If gotu kola is not the ingredient that will ultimately create an effective potion, then all of your energy spent on that particular herb will have been wasted."

He didn't respond; instead he began gathering ingredients for a new potion. He pushed the cauldron with the mint leaf to the side and slid a new one in to take its place. She watched as he swept around the room and piled the herbs, liquids, jars, and other assorted components on the countertop. His movements were precise and smooth when he began preparing each of the ingredients for inclusion in the potion. She wanted to say something to provoke some sort of response from him, but he seemed too intent on his work, and she was too enraptured with the sweeping motions of his hands as they dropped ingredient after ingredient into the small black cauldron.

Half the ingredients were in the mix, and he was stirring them before he spoke up again. "The ingredients are not the only things which affect the outcome of a potion. There are numerous variables to the process, and each one can create a dramatic change in the final product."

Snape dropped a pinch of white powder into the cauldron and continued. "The temperature of the fire or the lack of heat beneath the cauldron, the exact preparation of each ingredient, the length of time between stirrings and the direction it is stirred any of these may cause a shift in the potion."

"That's why most students find Potions so difficult," she said in a soft voice.

"And you? Did you find it difficult, Miss Granger?"

Hermione smiled softly. "Only when Neville wouldn't listen to me."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Longbottom and his notoriously volatile concoctions. I hesitate to even call them potions because they were good for nothing more than destroying one the cauldrons."

"He tried his best."

"Yes, and you tried your best to help him."

She shrugged and watched him drop a finely cut leaf into the cauldron. "Someone had to help him. He was scared stiff of you."

Snape added the final two ingredients and continued to stir. "Were you?"

"Scared of you?" Hermione asked. "Perhaps during my first two years at Hogwarts, but once I was older I realized that you were simply trying to run a safe classroom. I do think you could have been slightly nicer about it though."

"Nice was something I could not afford to be with my role as a spy and a Death Eater."

Hermione propped her elbow on the table and rested her chin in the palm of her hand while she watched Snape stir the potion. His face was tilted down to watch the swirl of the liquid inside the cauldron, and his stringy hair fell on both sides of his face like a curtain. He looked weary. Hermione wished that she could snap her fingers and make everything right for him; she wanted to give him a stable, working potion and allow him to get some real rest, possibly for the first time in his life. It looked like he hadn't had a decent night's sleep in years.

Snape knocked Hermione out of her thoughts when he stopped stirring and produced a small, empty vial from his pocket. He quickly bottled a portion of the potion and placed it back in the pocket of his frock coat. "Is it finished?" she asked.

"Finished, but unlikely to work." He finally looked up and met her eyes. "I'm afraid I've wasted your time and mine, Miss Granger. I suggest you run along and attempt to salvage what is left of your weekend. Good day." Snape Disapparated with a crack, leaving Hermione alone in the laboratory.

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Hermione stood in Snape's empty cottage for several minutes, wondering where he had gone so suddenly. Finally, she hoisted her bag over her shoulder and Disapparated as well. A moment later she found herself in the large lobby of St. Mungo's, asking the elderly witch at the reception desk for Ginny Weasley. Ginny met Hermione in the lobby before they decided to take a walk outside.

"What's up?" Ginny asked after they stepped out the front doors.

"Have you ever seen Snape visiting anyone at St. Mungo's?"

Ginny shook her head. "I haven't seen him since the hearing after the war."

Hermione shrugged. "Oh, well, it was just a hunch."

"What was a hunch? What's going on with Snape?"

Hermione pulled in a deep breath. "I'm worried about him."

"Worried about him?" Ginny smiled at Hermione. "Why would you be worried about Snape?"

"He works constantly, and he spends all of his free time trying to create a potion that will revive patients from long-term vegetative states. I've actually had to force him to eat lunch this past week." Hermione shrugged and glanced over at her friend. "I just thought that he might be creating the potion for a certain person... and that this person might be at St. Mungo's."

Ginny waved at a coworker who was returning from her break. "There is a ward of patients who have been in comas for years patients that don't have much hope at all of waking. I've never worked in that section before, but I know a couple people who have."

"Would it be possible to obtain a list of the patients in that ward?"

"It would have to be through unofficial channels. I'm not allowed to give that information out to just anyone."

Hermione elbowed Ginny lightly. "Come on, Ginny. I'm not just anyone."

"Yeah, yeah," Ginny said, laughing. "I'll get a copy for you, even if you are using it to help the bat of the dungeons himself. It's like you've picked up a new project. Are you planning on reintroducing a new and improved Snape to the wizarding world?"

Hermione shook her head and smiled. "This isn't a project. I'm just curious. Besides, I'm not sure if anyone in the world could help Severus Snape overcome his demons."

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## Potions Gone Wrong

Chapter 8 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

### Chapter 8: Potions Gone Wrong

Hermione watched Snape closely on Monday morning, looking for any indication that the potion he'd made on Saturday had been successful. There was no difference in his demeanor or attitude from any other day she had worked with him. He had been bent over his cauldron when she'd arrived that morning, and that was where he had been for the last three hours. Curiosity was driving Hermione mad, even though the potion was not one that she had any part in making.

Finally, she turned around to look at his back and cleared her throat. "Sir?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Did you have any luck with the potion on Saturday?"

He turned around to face her. "I don't believe that is any of your business, though I should have known asking for your help would be a waste of time. It was foolish of me to think that a young girl would be able to tell me something I didn't already know."

Hermione pressed herself into the counter behind her to keep her balance in the face of his insults. She didn't understand where this sudden loathing of her came from or why he was being downright mean to her this morning. It took a moment to catch her breath and gather her wits. When she did speak, her voice came out soft and with a tinge of sadness. "You did not provide me with enough time to help, sir. I spent all day Sunday in the Hogwarts Library looking for possible ingredients to boost the effectiveness of gotu kola. I *want* to help you."

Snape appeared to be surprised by her admission. His mouth opened just the slightest bit, and he stared at her with wide, astonished eyes. A moment later, he snapped his jaw shut and scowled at Hermione. "I was under the impression that the Hogwarts Library is for student and staff use, not for meddlesome graduates who can't seem to stay away."

Hermione blinked rapidly, trying to hold back her tears. Snape certainly had a knack of hurting her feelings and making her burn with anger at the same time. She wasn't sure whether she should punch him in his crooked nose or cry. She resolved that he wouldn't have the satisfaction of eliciting either reaction from her. "I made a small list of ingredients I don't recall seeing in your notes. Honestly, I don't think any of them will help you much, but I wanted to at least try," she said. She stepped forward and hastily placed the small piece of Muggle notebook paper on the counter beside his hand before turning her back on him and resuming her work.

He was silent for at least a minute. Hermione could feel his eyes boring into her back as she tried to stop her hands from shaking. She wasn't sure if the shaking was from nerves or anger over his horrible outburst at her. Finally, she heard the scuffle of his boots as he turned back around to his cauldron.

Hermione dared a quick glance over her shoulder. The sheet of notebook paper was gone. She couldn't help but smile softly to herself. It was peeking out of the corner of his pocket, the white paper standing out starkly against his black clothing. A few minutes later, she heard him whisper a Stasis charm under his breath and exit the room. The tension in her shoulders drained out, and she slumped against the worktable. *Perhaps I should just give up on this potion and throw out any thought of helping him. It's just not worth it if he's going to treat me like this when something doesn't work.*

She sighed and propped her chin on her hand, staring out the window above her. It had been raining for hours. Walking to the Three Broomsticks in the rain was out of the question; her hair was difficult enough to manage without the added moisture. Hermione watched as rivulets of water traced lines down the glass until it was nearly time for lunch. She planned on Apparating there, but she was still undecided on whether she wanted to buy Snape's lunch. He had gone off to who-knew-where, and his behavior had been atrocious.

"Your lunch is in the kitchen." Snape's voice jolted her out of her thoughts and nearly made her topple off the stool on which she was perched. By the time she turned around, he was gone.

Hermione furrowed her brows. *My lunch is in the kitchen?* She slid off the stool and hesitantly walked through the small house to the kitchen. Snape was sitting in his usual spot at the table with a large sandwich in his hands and the *Daily Prophet* in front of him. A tray of food, obviously from the Three Broomsticks, was sitting in front of the chair across from him. Hermione briefly wondered if he had poisoned it.

"Professor, you didn't have to buy my lunch. I really don't mind going to get it myself."

"Sit down and eat, Miss Granger," Snape said, taking another bite of his sandwich.

Hermione took her seat. She was surprised to see that the sandwich he had gotten her was exactly as it should have been turkey on wheat toast. A further examination under the bread revealed lettuce and tomatoes. It was how she had ordered it for herself many times before. Snape was paying attention to what she ate every day, or he had asked Rosmerta. Either way, she was surprised he had put so much effort into getting her lunch.

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"That's brilliant, Harry!" Hermione said, beaming at her friend.

Harry shrugged the compliment off and shook his head. "It's nothing much. I'm surprised no one has thought of it before."

"Hey!" Ron exclaimed. "I was part of this discovery, too. It would have never been possible without me."

"And your hot-headedness," Harry added.

Hermione curled her feet underneath her and settled onto the sofa in the flat the boys shared. She had gone there to spend time with them after work that day. "How exactly did you discover this charm anyway?"

Harry looked at Ron. "Ron was being dense a couple of days ago."

"I was not being dense," Ron corrected. "I had good reason to feel that way."

"Anyway," Harry continued, "this girl, Samantha, was talking to Ron after the game with Bulgaria. He was called over to chat with a reporter from *The Quibbler*, and she started talking to me."

"You were touching her!" Ron's face was red.

Harry waved his hand in the air, telling Ron to be quiet. "She was a bit flirty, asking me how well I could snog and all that sort of nonsense. Ron got angry that she was flirting with me."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron, won't you ever grow up? She was just a girl."

"Yeah, a gorgeous girl who happened to like me."

Harry laughed. "And every other Quidditch player in the stadium that day. I saw her feeling the muscles of Bulgaria's Keeper before she started batting her eyes at you."

Ron ignored Harry and picked up with the story. "Anyway, I was feeling betrayed and decided to just leave. I Apparated to Hogsmeade for a pint, but I didn't tell Harry where I was going."

"I ran over to catch him, but he had already Disapparated. I was frustrated that he had left in such a fit and things just fell into place in my mind," Harry said.

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. "So?"

"I said the incantation I told you about earlier, but I didn't concentrate on Apparating to any specific place. The incantation directed me, and I was able to follow the residual traces of Ron's destination."

"That's fascinating!" Hermione said. "Do you plan on notifying the Ministry?"

Harry firmly shook his head. "No way, I don't want any more attention than I've already got. Ron and I decided to keep this one under wraps for now." Hermione was slightly disappointed, but she understood why Harry wasn't keen on throwing himself to the media hounds again after all he had gone through with Voldemort and the war.

"So, how's the bat doing?" Ron asked.

She gave him a disapproving look. "Ronald Weasley, you should have more manners than that. You are an adult, after all."

"Bat, greasy git, prat, the worst professor I've ever had, Snivellus, Snape, whatever," he said with a shrug.

"Ron, you are the most childish adult I have ever met. As for my work with Snape, it is going as well as can be expected. He really hasn't changed much in the past few years. We're getting along tolerably well, I think." She shrugged and gave them both a smile. "I haven't gotten myself fired yet. That's good, right?"

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The owl was waiting on her windowsill when she arrived home that evening. It carried a small piece of parchment that held a list of all the patients currently residing in the hopeless ward at St. Mungo's. There were only fourteen people on the list. They were the unfortunate ones that magic could not heal. Ginny had even thought to list the length of time each had been there. A little over half had been there well over twenty years, obviously casualties of the first war with Voldemort. However, there were several wizards and witches from the more recent one.

Hermione scanned the list of brain dead patients several times, but did not see any name that sounded familiar in the least. Of course, it could very well be that Snape knew one of the patients whom she may not. The list really wouldn't do her any good without some additional information about each person. All things considered, Hermione didn't think asking Ginny to break yet another set of confidentiality rules was worth the information.

*I can't help him, so I should just stop thinking about it. Snape will ask for my help if or when he needs it. It is best that I just keep my nose out of it until that time.*

A short note from Ginny was crammed onto the bottom of the parchment.

*Complete list as of yesterday. Robert (French Healer) works in that ward sometimes. Maybe you could ask him out to dinner to discuss this. Love, G.*

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ginny's persistence. The last thing she needed in her life was a boyfriend. She had her hands full with a moody, demanding boss who had a penchant for self-destruction.

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Hermione's attempt to weasel her way into additional work on Tuesday didn't exactly go as planned. Terminus Est was in high demand at many of the apothecaries, and Snape had trouble meeting that demand, even with Hermione's help. He was not even close to completing his daily work when she finished cleaning the last of her cauldrons. She offered to stay after hours and help him with the potions he was working on as a way of repaying him for buying her lunch. Snape declined her offer to help and told her to go home.

She considered pressing the matter, but he had not been in a very cordial mood so far that week, even though he had bought her lunch two days in a row. Instead of potentially getting herself in hot water with the boss, she gathered her things and Apparated home just a few minutes before six o'clock. By eight o'clock she was brewing a potion on her kitchen counter while eating a late dinner. The soup she had warmed up in the microwave tasted dreadful, but her stomach was demanding food, and it was really the only thing around that looked the least bit appetizing.

She sat the bowl down by the sink so her hands were free to stir the experimental potion in the cauldron. If her calculations were correct, it should induce a state similar to laughing gas in the drinker. Fred had asked her to modify and correct his list of ingredients because the potion only made people pass out. She couldn't say no to an old friend, especially now that he was carrying on Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes by himself. George had been killed shortly before the final battle. It had dealt quite a blow to the entire Weasley family, but had hit Fred the hardest. She had offered to help in any way she could, and that usually involved fixing defective potions for Fred's joke shop in Diagon Alley.

The potion wasn't even close to being finished, and more than half the ingredients were scattered over the counter beside the cauldron. Hermione stirred the potion and rubbed her tired eyes. All in all, things with Snape were working out better than she had anticipated. He was still quite grumpy and difficult to deal with at times, but the moments of connection she found with him, though they were few and far between, made up for most of the hateful remarks he made. Hermione finally understood that the insults and hatred were simply a way of masking his uneasiness and distress. He was obviously a very troubled man, but she had learned the hard way that you cannot help someone who does not wish to be helped. Just as with the house elves, Severus Snape did not want her help, and if he did, he had a very odd way of showing it.

Hermione carefully added a small pile of shredded chocolate to the mixture and stepped away to rinse her bowl in the sink. Her eyes were puffy and blurry from working over a cauldron all day, but she really did need to finish this batch for Fred to test. She had been promising it to him for over a week.

Stifling a yawn, Hermione dried the bowl and reached up to return it to its place in the cabinet. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Crookshanks slinking along the highest shelf in the kitchen. "Get down from there this instant, Crookshanks," she said. "I've left ingredients up there, and I don't want you to spill them or..." Hermione trailed off when she saw his large tail whip around to hit one of the small glass phials. It somersaulted in the air several times as it fell toward the floor. As luck would have it, it was headed directly for the cauldron she was brewing in.

Hermione leapt forward to catch it, but her reflexes were no match for gravity. The glass phial hit the edge of the cauldron just before the lid popped off and skittered across the floor. The liquid hissed as it hit the bubbling potion. She didn't even have time to shield her face or jump out of the way when the potion exploded from the cauldron and splashed over her and the flat.

Author's Note: Thank you to my lovely beta, Snarkyroxy. Also, thanks go out to Allyness and Jessica for lending me their eyes while I was writing this. As for who Snape's potion is for my lips are sealed. No matter how much I'm begged, I'm not giving any hints. You don't really want me to anyway. It would ruin all the fun.

A Quiet Place to Sleep

Chapter 9 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

Chapter 9: A Quiet Place to Sleep

She had to give him credit for not inundating her with questions as soon as she walked into his laboratory. Then again, Professor Snape never was one for asking questions about a student, or former student's, wellbeing. She was very much aware of the deep red cut across her left cheek. It was healing quite well, and another twenty-four hours would find it gone. The rash was another matter entirely.

When her potion was contaminated, she was doused in the volatile substance it had become. One of the glass shards of the phial cut her cheek, but her skin immediately reacted to the sticky green goo of the potion, creating a red rash on her left cheek and down her neck, vanishing beneath the collar of her shirt. The doctors at St. Mungo's told her that they were unfamiliar with the rash, but assumed it had something to do with the potion. They seemed confident that time would clear it up with the help of an all-purpose healing salve.

After the accident the previous night, she had not slept. A series of people had paraded through her home, attempting to determine if the substance was toxic or if it was simply a mess to be cleaned up. Though all of her neighbors were wizards or witches, they were still concerned about her unauthorized experimentation in the building. She was promptly kicked out pending a hearing by the residents' association the following week. She wasn't sure if she would be allowed to return. Her personal things were currently shrunk and packed in her suitcase beside Snape's door.

It took him fifteen minutes to ask. They were both working at their separate workstations, and he spoke without even turning around. "Do you mind telling me where you received your injuries, Miss Granger?"

Hermione grimaced. She wanted to get through this day without Snape finding out what an incompetent fool she had been. Storing potentially dangerous ingredients directly above a cauldron in use was generally a bad idea. "I'd prefer not to talk about it, Professor."

By ten o'clock he turned around to face her, crossing his arms over his chest. She could feel his eyes boring into her back. Hermione was sure she looked a right mess with the rumpled set of robes she had thrown on this morning after leaving St. Mungo's and her hair only pinned back haphazardly.

She turned around and let out a deep breath. "Yes, sir?"

"If you tell me what happened, then perhaps I might be able to give you something for the rash," he said in an even tone. She couldn't discern any worry or concern in his

voice, nor could she hear mocking or exasperation.

Hermione touched the rash on her neck. It burned slightly when it came in contact with anything. "I was working on a potion last night, and my cat knocked a phial of something, as yet unidentified, into a half-completed potion. It exploded, and I was covered. The doctors at St. Mungo's say it should clear up in the next two to three weeks."

Snape raised his brow at her.

She felt like sinking into the earth. Instead, she rubbed her eyes and returned his gaze wearily. "I've been kicked out of my flat until the association meets next week to discuss if I should be allowed to return." Hermione paused and then continued, "I assure you that this will not effect my performance here. I intend to give as much effort as you are accustomed to receiving from me."

"Place a Stasis charm on your potion and follow me," Snape said. He waited in the hallway for her while she stopped the brewing process. Hesitantly, she followed him down the hall and into one of the rooms that was always closed off to her. It was an office. The room was not exceptionally large, holding only an old, battered desk, three bookshelves, and two wooden chairs. The only other piece of furniture she saw was a cabinet that he was standing before. He opened the door and rummaged around inside before pulling out a clear jar of light blue jelly. Snape motioned for Hermione to have a seat in one of the wooden chairs. She quickly slid into the seat and watched his slow movements with wide eyes.

"This is a healing salve," he said as he pulled the other chair closer to sit in front of her. "I'm sure they gave you something similar at St. Mungo's, but they don't buy their products from me. This will work much better." He unscrewed the lid of the jar and hesitated. For a moment she thought he was going to dip his fingers into the jelly and spread it over her rash. Hermione's heart was pounding, and she felt incredibly nervous and vulnerable.

Snape offered the jar to her, and she took it from his hand, taking care not to touch his fingers. "Thank you," she said.

"Cover the rash with the salve three times a day, and it should be gone within two days."

Hermione laughed softly, her nervousness edging its way into her tone. "I wish you could fix my flat this easily."

Snape waited until she dipped her fingers into the jelly and spread it over her cheek before he stood and walked over to the window. "Your flat is completely your responsibility, Miss Granger. You should be more careful where you place your ingredients."

The salve was a welcome coolness on her irritated skin, and she applied it liberally to her cheek, neck, collarbone, and shoulder. The discomfort of the rash was nearly gone by the time she finished and replaced the cap on the jar. "I admit I was careless in regards to the phials and jars sitting on the shelf. I just can't believe they've kicked me out until the association meets. I had to ask Harry and Ron if I could stay with them."

Snape turned around to face her with a sour expression on his face. "Still carousing with those miscreants, Miss Granger? Have you not learned your lesson and grown out of those bothersome wizards?"

Hermione simply shook her head at him. His animosity toward Harry had ceased to bother her or raise her hackles. When it came to Harry, Snape was as childish as anyone, denouncing the youngest Potter like Harry was carrying on his father's legacy of teasing the less fortunate students.

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Hermione was running on two hours of sleep in the past two days. Her hair was a knotted mess, dark circles were visible beneath her weary eyes, and her clothes were a wrinkled disaster. She had thought staying with Harry and Ron would solve her problem. They could spend time together and catch up while she got a free room, or sofa, until her flat was inhabitable again. She was still holding out hope that they would not evict her from the building for the minor mishap.

Unfortunately, Harry and Ron kept her up most of the night. They talked, played games, and insisted on waking her with a rude prank every time she was able to fall asleep. She wasn't too upset with them because she felt as if the three of them had fallen back into old times, staying up late and talking until the wee hours of the morning like best friends should. However, two hours of sleep was not conducive to working the following day.

Snape raised an eyebrow when she entered the laboratory that morning, but he did not venture to say anything or inquire about her state of disarray. It was one small favor in a morning from hell. Her eyes were bleary and strained, and her limbs felt unbearably heavy.

By ten o'clock that morning she was beyond exhausted. Potion-making was not an activity for those with little to no sleep under their belts. Hermione had five cauldrons with a different potion in each one. She was moving one of the cauldrons to the right for bottling when her grip faltered, and the brew slipped from her hands. She was just fast enough to step away as the cauldron smacked against the corner of the counter and crashed onto the floor. The liquid inside was a remover for stuck objects, and it splattered across the bottom of Snape's immaculate robe. The horror was written on Hermione's face, but she could not will herself into movement.

Snape turned, calmly pulled out his wand, and banished the acidic liquid before righting the cauldron and placing it back on the countertop. There was no lasting damage except the singeing along the bottom few inches of his robe. "I'm so sorry, Professor," Hermione said, hiding her face in her hands.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, why my otherwise neat and tidy assistant looks as horrible as the mess she has just made on my laboratory floor?"

Hermione's mouth opened and closed several times before she could form actual sounds and words. "I'm staying with Harry and Ron while the building association discusses my future in the flat after that potions accident. They're both quite a handful."

Snape raised both his brows at her this time. "A handful?"

Hermione blushed and backtracked. "Oh no, there's nothing... nothing between either of them and myself. I mean to say that they are loud, rambunctious boys with no concept of time or how to be quiet so I can get some rest. They're accustomed to staying up late and going out for drinks with their mates on the Quidditch team."

Crossing his arms, Snape leaned back against the counter and ran his eyes over her once. "That is the curse of staying with two such idiots, I'm afraid. Your lack of rest is your own fault."

She was running on minimal sleep, and his commentary on what she should and shouldn't do was extremely irritating. "Well, it's not like I had any other place to go on such short notice, nor did I want to impose on anyone." Hermione whirled around to face her cauldrons again. She began chopping an asphodel root, the knife slicing through it easily and smacking into the countertop with considerable force.

"You may want to check that attitude of yours at the door, Miss Granger," Snape said.

"You may want to do the same, *Professor*." Hermione flinched and bit her lip as soon the words came out of her mouth. *He's either going to kill me or kick me out of his house*, Hermione thought as she finished chopping the ingredient. *And I deserve both punishments. That was incredibly rude of me.*

Instead of an irate Snape hauling her out of his house by the scruff of her neck, she got the cold shoulder the remainder of the day, even though he still bought her lunch like he had every other day that week.

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Hermione felt like she was losing her mind. Harry and Ron simply did not understand the importance of sleep. Her second night at their flat was filled with friends coming and going, a barrage of new acquaintances, and several blind dates that Hermione barely managed to squeeze out of at the last minute. Either they were always up and

about or her presence had brought about party week in the Potter/Weasley household. Crookshanks was unbearably annoyed with the current living situation, and he made it known by shredding her favorite pair of pants.

Her workday was not fairing any better than the previous evening. By two o'clock Hermione had managed to cut the tip of her index finger with a sharp blade and ruin two batches of a potion that used expensive ingredients. Snape barely concealed his irritation over her poor performance. She had apologized profusely, but the words seemed to mean very little to him.

"Professor, I truly am sorry about this," she said, scrubbing the cauldron clean. "I just need a good night's rest, and I'll be back to my old self."

Snape emerged from the storage room with the necessary ingredients to brew the botched potion again. "I suggest you find another place to stay, Miss Granger. I will not have these debacles happening every day because you insist upon staying with these so-called friends. They're a bad influence on your work, and I refuse to be inconvenienced by their actions through you."

"I would go elsewhere, but I feel as if I'd be imposing," she snapped at him. Snape knew just what to say to make her angry, and she found that she was rising to the occasion more often now that he had not fired her at the first sign of her impudence.

He snatched the cauldron out of her hands. "Pack your things and stay here for all I care, but I cannot work with someone who causes daily accidents and wastes my stores."

Hermione opened her mouth, but the angry remark died on her lips when she realized what he had just said. Snape had offered her a place to stay until her apartment was available again. At first she thought she would have to be certifiably insane to take him up on that offer, but then she remembered the hectic nights at the boys' flat. She was reasonably sure that Professor Snape spent his evenings in quiet study or brewing potions until the light was too dim to see by, which was much more appealing than war stories and practical jokes.

"Are you serious about your offer?" she asked.

Snape dumped a cup of pomegranate seeds into the cauldron. "If that's what it will take to regain my competent employee, then I am willing to sacrifice my solitude for a day or two."

"Thank you, sir. I'll consider it." Hermione returned to her work and smiled to herself. Severus Snape had actually made a nice gesture and offered to help her in a time of need. What was the world coming to?

She mulled the decision over in her head for the rest of the afternoon, weighing the pros and cons of both choices. When her work was finally completed, she cleared her throat and waited for Snape to acknowledge her.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Does your offer still stand, Professor?"

He stopped his work and turned to face her. "I suppose so," Snape replied cautiously. "Why?"

"I would like to accept, if you don't mind."

He looked only slightly uncomfortable, but quickly recovered with a shrug. "Very well."

Author's Note: Thank you to Snarkyroxy for being such an awesome beta. Also thank you to Allyness and Jessica for their eyes.

The Room at the End of the Hall

Chapter 10 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

Chapter 10: The Room at the End of the Hall

Hermione Apparated on Snape's doorstep with her suitcase and Crookshanks. She had not asked Snape about bringing the half-Kneazle, but there really was no other place to leave him. As had been the custom in the past, Hermione rapped lightly on the door before opening it and slipping into the quiet house. The sun had set, and the entryway was dark. Crookshanks immediately jumped from her arms and padded off into the shadows of the house.

A dim light was coming from the living room. Hermione went to investigate. She found Snape sitting in one of the armchairs with his legs crossed and a book in his lap. His robes were missing, leaving him in a white dress shirt and black trousers. The lantern's soft light was kind to the harsh angles of his face, and she felt her heart twist just a bit for him. Snape really was a good man; he was just inept at showing his entire character. He always seemed to fall back on the callous, inconsiderate portion of himself when in social situations. It was obviously a tactic to protect his self-esteem from those who would poke fun at him.

Snape raised his eyes to look at her. "You may place your things in the room at the end of the hall."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. "But, sir... I thought, well, I thought that was your bedroom."

"It is a bedroom, Miss Granger. You'll be sleeping there during your stay."

She had already done the math and knew his house well enough to know that bedroom was the only bedroom. "I really don't mind sleeping in here. I can Transfigure the chairs into a bed or sofa for the night and have them returned to normal by the morning."

"You are a guest, and as such, you will take the bedroom."

Hermione knew her mouth was hanging open in a most unsightly fashion, but she never thought she would see the day when Snape was being kind and considerate to her for no apparent reason.

"Do close your mouth, Miss Granger. Don't be so surprised that I retain a modicum of manners. A guest is always given the bed. It would be uncouth of me to make you sleep here." He lifted a hand to indicate the living room. His house really wasn't all that welcoming when one took the time to look. The living room was sparsely furnished with only the two armchairs and a small end table. None of the rooms had curtains, artwork, or decorative items. Then again, Hermione was not surprised. She would have expected nothing more of Snape.

"Yes, sir," she softly said, turning to find the bedroom.

It was furnished just like the rest of the house sparse and minimalist. Hermione thought it was cold and impersonal. The bed was simple and dressed in white sheets and a white blanket. The only other furniture in the room was a small nightstand and a wardrobe beside the window. The shutters were tightly closed, leaving a single lantern hanging from a hook by the door as the only source of light. *There's little wonder he isn't getting any sleep in this room. It's positively sterile and unwelcoming,* Hermione thought as she placed her suitcase at the foot of the bed.

She was extremely tired and extremely uncomfortable with the idea of making small talk with Snape at eight o'clock in the evening before she commandeered his bed. However, she also didn't want to appear rude by retiring without thanking him for his generosity. Taking care to be as quiet as possible, she retraced her path down the hall and peeked into the living room. Snape was still sitting in the chair with the book on his lap. His long fingers were idly playing with the edges of the pages. It was such a small gesture, but she found it fascinating and was unable to pull her eyes away as he ruffled the paper.

"Your cat is on my foot." Snape's voice jerked Hermione's thoughts back into the greater world that did not revolve around his fingers lovingly caressing the book in his lap. Glancing down she saw that Crookshanks was stretched out across Snape's left foot.

Hermione dashed over to pick him up, but Crookshanks slid away before she could grab him. "I'm sorry," she said, standing up and clasping her hands behind her back. "Where should I confine him for the night? The bedroom, perhaps?"

Snape shrugged and returned his eyes to the page in front of him. "I see no reason to confine him, provided, of course, that he does not cause an explosion in my house as well."

Hermione opened her mouth to assure him that Crookshanks would not be roaming about the shelves in the laboratory when she realized that his comment was a weak attempt at a joke. She smiled. "Of course not, sir." Shifting slightly on her feet and clearing her throat, she continued, "I'd like to thank you for your hospitality. I appreciate it, and you, more than you know."

Snape slowly raised his eyes up to look at her. His gaze made Hermione nervous for some reason that she couldn't quite pin down.

"I believe I'll retire for the evening and catch up on my rest," she added. He gave her a brief nod before she turned away and walked down the hall. She could feel his eyes on her back until the shadows of the dark hall swallowed her.

A few minutes spent in the bathroom found her in her nightgown and ready for bed. The prospect of sleep was heavenly after so many nights of uncomfortable and interrupted rest. The sheets were cool against her feet and arms when she slid beneath the crisp, white linens on his bed. She couldn't resist pressing her nose into the pillow and inhaling. She expected to detect his unique scent there, but it was only the faint odor of soap. He had obviously washed the bedclothes before she arrived. The realization was slightly disappointing to her, but Hermione was unsure why she cared whether his pillow smelled like soap or not. Sleeping in a former professor's bed was awkward enough without it being covered with his scent.

Despite being horribly exhausted, she lay awake for hours listening to his movements. The house was small and isolated, so there was virtually no noise through the cracked door except for Snape shifting in his chair every few minutes. It was well after eleven o'clock when she finally slipped into a comfortable rest. Snape was still awake and still reading the book long after she found sleep.

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Snape met her in the hall the following morning with a cup of tea. She had already gone through her morning ritual to tame her hair and make herself reasonably presentable, so she took the cup with a murmured thank you and followed him into the laboratory. Fridays were always the least busy days since most orders arrived on Mondays. Both Hermione and Snape began working on their potions without exchanging morning pleasantries. She didn't think he was the morning sort.

The lab was quiet and Hermione was grateful for the peaceful nature of his household as opposed to the rambunctious Potter/Weasley flat. She had slept through the night and woken up refreshed. The offer of tea and the generally pleasant atmosphere Snape was projecting was unexpected, but welcome.

After he brought lunch back for both of them, she asked if he would mind her staying another night or two. He shrugged and, between bites of his sandwich, told her that she could stay until the association decided her fate. She expected some sort of backhanded comment about her being a bother, but it never came. Instead, he seemed to be taking her stay extremely well.

Snape looked better than he ever had since the war ended. The daily meals were filling out his sunken cheeks, and even his hair seemed healthier. There were still dark circles beneath his eyes, but she couldn't fault him for those. She had experienced many sleepless or nightmare-fraught nights since the final battle. Hermione couldn't imagine the horror Snape had seen while entrenched in Voldemort's camp. At the moment, she was simply happy to see her risk of bringing him food that day the week before had paid off. Two solid weeks of eating at least one full meal each day worked wonders.

Friday afternoon was just as quiet as Friday morning, and Hermione finished her work early. She pulled a stool up and watched Snape brewing. His hands moved so quickly and precisely that they hypnotized her. They spoke briefly of working on his project over the weekend, since she would be staying for a day or two longer. Hermione was surprised that he seemed to take her participation for granted after he had blown up about it on Monday morning, telling her that she couldn't possibly help him. However, she felt like she should take what she could get, and she enthusiastically agreed to assist him the following day.

Snape dismissed her for the evening at four o'clock. Hermione Apparated to Diagon Alley to owl Robert, Ginny's French Healer. She had been thinking about Snape's potion since early that morning and couldn't seem to get the idea out of her head that he had someone specific that he wished to use it on. Robert was her best chance of discovering if Snape really was visiting someone in St. Mungo's long-term coma ward. If a date was the easiest way of getting that information, then she would take it like a woman and arrange a date.

Robert's reply arrived shortly after she returned to Snape's cottage. His letter was brief, but told her that he had made reservations at The Culinary Cauldron for Saturday evening. Snape was reading in his usual chair when the owl skittered to a stop on the windowsill, but he didn't ask Hermione what the letter said or who it was from. He simply raised a brow and went back to his book. She felt as if she was interrupting his private time so she retreated to the bedroom, saying that she planned on turning in early.

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*Author's Note: Thank you to Snarkyroxy for being a wonderful beta. Thanks also to Allyness and Jessica for helping me out. Just a reminder to anyone who may not know... This fic is finished and is total of fifteen chapters. I'm posting two chapters a week until I've posted everything. This chapter is a bit of a transition one, but I promise you that the next one will be longer and involve a great deal more interaction between Hermione and Snape.*



# Apologies

## Chapter 11 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

### Chapter 11: Apologies

Snape was the most complicated and frustrating man she had ever met, but Hermione felt like each time she was near him she got caught in his gravitational pull. Despite his personality flaws, of which there were many, he was still interesting, insightful, intelligent, and absolutely fascinating. It helped that he had been treating her like a human being for the last few days. Letting her stay at his home was completely unexpected, but she found that her second night there was quite peaceful. She was more grateful than she could express for a place to sleep and his quiet companionship.

They worked on his potion to restore vegetative patients all Saturday morning, but neither of them had made much headway with the many journals and books strewn across the laboratory. Hermione knew why she wasn't much help; she couldn't stop watching him. It was completely silly of her to be stealing glances at her former teacher while they worked in silence, but she couldn't help herself. The way he moved, the fluttering of the yellowed pages beneath his fingers, even the strand of black hair that continually slipped from behind his ear to hang beside his face, were all so fascinating she couldn't stop looking to save her life. Severus Snape certainly was a first-class mystery. There was more to her Potions Master than she had ever dreamed.

*Harry and Ron would just die if they found out that I'm actually beginning to like Professor Snape* Hermione thought with a slight smile playing over her lips.

By that afternoon, Hermione was testing a few ingredients to determine their interactions. Two of the ingredients were ones she had never worked with before. The powdered Hippogriff hoof was a rare item, but what she had read of its healing qualities made it an ideal candidate for testing in this potion. If her calculations were correct, the powder would need to be added while stirring the potion.

She tipped the measuring spoon over the cauldron, and the light powder sprinkled over the bubbling liquid. A small portion of it scattered over the back of her hand. Hermione shook it off into the brew and continued to stir. Moments later she felt a searing pain in her right hand. She immediately dropped the stirring rod and stepped away from the cauldron, clenching her fist in front of her. Hermione's small noises of pain caught Snape's attention, and he looked up to see what had happened.

Tears of pain blurred her eyes. "It hurts," she said through clenched teeth.

Snape swept around the island countertop separating them and surveyed the ingredients in front of her. "Did you spill the powdered Hippogriff hoof on your hand?" he asked calmly.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and shook her hand in the air, trying to lessen the pain. "Yes, I think so."

"Lick your hand."

Hermione opened her eyes. "What?"

Snape rolled his eyes at her. "Saliva counteracts the powder. It will stop the burning."

"I'm not going to lick my hand! My tongue will burn! I need to wash this off."

Snape grabbed her arm as she rushed over to the sink. "That will only make it worse, Miss Granger. Lick the exposed skin. It will feel better."

"It will burn my tongue!" she shouted, pulling away from him. The pain was too much to bear, and it was getting worse with every second the residual powder was left clinging to her skin.

Snape held fast to her arm and bent it so her injured hand was only inches from her mouth. "I assure you that it will not burn your mouth."

Hermione jerked her hand away and struggled against his tight grip. She knew if she could just get to the sink and wash it off things would be much better. Snape refused to let go. She felt him twist her arm again. Suddenly the pain was only a dull throb, replaced with something warm and wet.

Hermione blinked the tears from her eyes and looked at Professor Snape. The back of her hand was pressed against his open mouth, and his tongue was slowly tracing the skin that had been on fire just moments before. His eyes were closed and his long fingers were wrapped lightly around her wrist and hand. Hermione tried to breathe, but her lungs seemed to be malfunctioning and refused to pull in any oxygen. However, she knew that to be untrue because she could hear the sharp puffs of air she exhaled between her slightly parted lips.

His lips lightly grazed her hand when he pulled back to exhale a long, hot breath. Her hand grew cold momentarily as he pulled in another breath before laving her with his tongue again. She wanted to kiss him, to rip his shirt until all those buttons flew across the room. The wanton thoughts disturbed Hermione, and she tried to push them out of her mind. *Obviously I've gone one too many months without a boyfriend or a date.*

Snape slowly opened his eyes to look at Hermione. She was embarrassed to admit that he most likely saw a heaving chest and heavy-lidded eyes. Crawling under a rock for the rest of her life did not sound like such a bad idea at that moment.

He slowly pulled away and licked his lips. "I told you," Snape whispered.

Hermione nodded her head uncertainly. "... I didn't know. I've never used, uh, powdered Hippogriff hoof before. I didn't know about the... saliva."

"So it would seem." Snape slowly released her hand and stepped away.

The air hitting the moisture on her hand reminded Hermione of exactly what had happened. Professor Snape had licked her hand, and she had liked it more than was reasonable. "Thank you," she said simply.

Snape licked his lips again. "Yes, well, the next time I suggest you listen to me, Miss Granger."

"Yes, sir." Her voice was horribly breathy and soft. The sound of it made her cringe. *Oh, what he must think of me! I was so dreadfully obvious in my attraction.*

Snape looked uncomfortable, but he was trying to put on an indifferent face. "Perhaps we should adjourn for the day. I'm nearly finished with this batch here." He indicated the cauldron on the countertop that he had been working on that afternoon.

Hermione nodded and tried to will away the blush that had crept up her cheeks.

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It was fortunate that Snape had decided to adjourn their research session when he did. It was nearly five o'clock, and Hermione's date with Robert, the Healer from St. Mungo's, was at six. She retreated to the bathroom with a change of clothes for a shower and a bit of freshening up before leaving to meet him. After a great deal of fuss, she Transfigured her jeans and t-shirt into a black dress with elegant straps. It fell just above her knees, but didn't cling so much that Hermione was left feeling uncomfortable.

She felt Snape's eyes on her as she walked into the living room. He had finished with his potion and settled in the living room with a book. Hermione told him that she was going out for the evening and would be home by ten o'clock at the latest. Snape did not say anything in response, but his eyes seemed to trace her movements until she walked out the front door. Hermione leaned against the wooden door for a moment after closing it to compose herself before Apparating to Diagon Alley.

Robert was waiting for her at The Culinary Cauldron, just a block down from Flourish and Blotts. He was classically handsome with his blond hair and chiseled features. She felt like he was out of her league, but he tried his best to treat her warmly during dinner. It was obvious that he had only briefly worked in the ward of St. Mungo's she was interested in, and during that time he had not see anyone even remotely resembling Snape.

By the time they had finished their entrees, Hermione wanted to leave. Robert was nice enough, but she couldn't stop thinking about Professor Snape. She felt like she had been cheated out of a date, and it was no one's fault but her own. If she could simply push Snape from her mind for a few hours, she was sure that Robert would have been a charming companion. However, she found banishing Severus Snape from her thoughts fairly impossible, especially after the awkward moment in the laboratory only a couple hours before.

She begged off dessert and made half-hearted promises to keep in contact with Robert. Hermione doubted she would keep them. He was nice, but he certainly wasn't interesting when compared to other people in her life. She left him with a quick kiss on the cheek and Apparated back to Snape's cottage. It was still early in the evening, only a few minutes after seven o'clock, and it was no surprise that Snape was exactly where she had left him, reading a book in one of the living room armchairs. His lips were thin and puckered into a very sour expression.

Hermione sat down in the other armchair and folded her hands in her lap.

"How was your date?" he said abruptly.

She floundered for an answer to the unexpected question. "My date?"

"Yes." He looked up from the pages to catch her eyes.

"How did you know I was on a date?"

"Your attire," he said, gesturing to her dress.

Hermione looked down at the dress. "Oh." The silence was nearly unbearable. Finally she spoke up again. "I think I'll just get ready for bed. I'm feeling a bit tired."

Snape shifted his eyes back to the book in his lap. She knew it was his way of dismissing her, so she rose from the chair and retreated to the bedroom.

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After two solid nights of sleep, Hermione found it nearly impossible to fall asleep at eight o'clock in the evening. She felt ridiculous even trying; it had been well over ten years since her bedtime had been that early. For over three hours, she lay awake in Professor Snape's bed and thought about everything the past, her new job, her friends, her love life, the situation with her flat, and most of all, Severus Snape. He certainly was one of a kind, and not always in a good way.

She could hear him shifting about in the living room through the small crack left between the door and the doorframe. The man would not, or could not, rest for an entire night. For all Hermione knew, he hadn't slept a wink since she'd been staying at his home. It wouldn't be surprising judging by the dark circles beneath his eyes.

Hermione slid out of bed and slipped a robe over her nightgown. Neither of the garments fell below her knees, but the robe covered her bare arms and made her feel more secure. She cinched the robe and cautiously stepped out into the hallway. The dim light in the living room was visible where she stood, and it gave her courage to continue down the hall. It was silly for her to toss and turn when he couldn't sleep either.

Snape was sitting in the same armchair with three small stacks of books piled around his feet. Crookshanks was asleep and curled up in the second armchair. Both heard her when she entered the room and lifted their eyes to watch her.

"I couldn't sleep," Hermione said softly to Snape.

"Yes, I see that," he replied, sweeping his eyes over her night attire.

She wrapped her arms around herself self-consciously. "Do you mind if I keep you company, or perhaps borrow a book or two?"

"If you can extract your cat from my chair, you're more than welcome to it, Miss Granger." Snape returned his eyes to the book.

The chair looked stiff and uninviting so late at night. "Professor?"

He lifted his dark eyes to her again with a brow cocked in question.

"May I Transfigure the two chairs into a sofa?"

He hesitated for a moment and then stood up with his book in hand. "If you insist."

Crookshanks seemed to know what was coming because he jumped out of the chair and trotted across the living room floor. With a simple swish of her wand, the two uncomfortable chairs shifted into a plush sofa with plenty of room for both her and Professor Snape. He waited for her to take a seat before he did. Hermione sat down on the end nearest to her and folded her legs up into the sofa beside her. The floor was surprisingly cold, and she hadn't thought to wear any slippers.

Snape sat on the opposite end and settled his book back into his lap. He attempted to read, but turned his head to look at her again after only a minute. "Are you going to watch me all evening, Miss Granger?"

"Would you be opposed to talking with me?"

"About what?"

Hermione shrugged. "Anything."

"As I remember, I asked you a question earlier this evening that you never answered."

She replayed her interaction with him after she had returned from the date. "You asked me how my date went."

"Yes."

Discussing her love life, or lack thereof, with Professor Snape was daunting and definitely uncomfortable. "It went as well as can be expected."

Snape closed the book in his lap and turned more fully toward her. "And how well is that?"

"Not very well," Hermione confessed with a grimace and shrug.

"Which one was it?"

She furrowed her brow in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Potter or Weasley?" Snape clarified. He seemed oddly intent upon hearing the answer.

A nervous laugh tumbled from Hermione's lips. "Neither. I told you before that the three of us are just friends. The date was with a Healer from St. Mungo's."

Snape raised his brows. "Not your taste?"

Hermione gave him a half-hearted smile. "Not really." *Oh, no, Professor. I prefer a pompous, black-haired Potions Master with a tongue sharp as a dagger.* Before her actual thoughts slipped out, she continued with the explanation. "I was bored and left before dessert."

"You were so bored that you left early to come back here and lie in bed, staring at the ceiling for over three hours, before trotting back in here to force conversation on me?"

"Yes, that's about it."

She almost thought she saw him smirk at her response. "I see. Well, how fortunate for you that I'm in such an... amiable mood." His gaze was on her bare legs, not her face. Hermione shifted and pulled her robe down over her legs, but he simply moved his eyes up to her hand on the hem of the robe. Suddenly he jerked his eyes back to the book in his lap and opened it again.

"You're looking much better now that you've been eating each day," Hermione said softly, lifting her eyes carefully to watch his reaction.

"Better than what, exactly?"

She frowned at him. "Better than you looked when I first began working for you three weeks ago. Your complexion has more color to it, and you seem healthier."

Snape snorted and flipped a page in the book.

"You'd look even better if you got some rest now and then."

He sighed and ran a hand over the page he had been attempting to read. "Rest is not something I'm overly familiar with, Miss Granger. I've had little of it in my past, and I don't expect much more in my future."

His soft voice struck a cord deep within Hermione. She wanted to reach out and touch the dark bruises beneath his eyes in the hope she could sooth them away. "It's actually fairly easy, Professor. You just close your eyes and let go."

"It appears the letting go part is the problem." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"The war?" she asked. "I have nightmares sometimes, too. Yours must be "

Snape nodded. "Yes. They are rather horrendous. I don't care to speak of them, actually."

Hermione pulled her robe tighter around her body. "I understand."

"Do you?"

"I don't understand what it is like to be you, but I do understand your need for privacy. I apologize if I push too far at times. I've just come to care about you, and I hope you can find the peace you need."

He seemed genuinely surprised at her admission. His eyes widened, revealing the dark irises and the even darker pupils. She had never seen eyes so dark, yet so bright. She felt like she should look away before they blinded her. When he spoke again, his voice was soft and somewhat sad. "You're a very unusual young lady, Miss Granger."

Hermione gave him a small smile. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Of that, I am not sure," he admitted, returning to his book.

"Why didn't you thank me after I testified for you?" The question shot out of her mouth before Hermione had a chance to rephrase it or think it over. It took Snape by surprise as well. He fumbled for an answer, his lips moving, but no sound coming from them.

Finally, he spoke. "I was angry with everyone."

"But why?"

"I don't know, Miss Granger," he said, flipping the book closed again. "I hated the world at the time. I hated myself and everything that had happened." He sighed. "I was in shock."

"You helped us win the war. How could you have been angry with yourself?"

He caught her gaze and held it. "You don't know the things I had to do to survive, and I hope you never have reason to know. My self-hatred was justified."

"You were very courageous and saved many lives. I don't know if I would still be here if it weren't for you." She shifted a bit closer to him without even realizing it.

"Don't underestimate yourself, Miss Granger."

"Don't underestimate *yourself*, Professor Snape. You had a hand in saving the wizarding world. I always felt like I owed you a debt for all you sacrificed for us, for me. I'm Muggle-born. Had you not helped us stop Voldemort, I could be dead or enslaved now. I'll always appreciate you and what you did."

"Your gratitude is misplaced."

Hermione smiled softly at him. "You can refuse my gratitude, but you will never diminish it. I testified at your hearing because I believed in you. I wanted you to have your life back after so many years of sacrificing yourself for the cause."

He turned his head abruptly. "You truly are an unusual young lady."

"After all I've been through, I imagine that's right on the mark, Professor." A bittersweet smile lingered on Hermione's face for several minutes as she stared into a dark

corner of the room.

"Does the past plague you as well, Miss Granger?" he asked, finally breaking the silence.

"I still have nightmares about it. What I saw in those weeks leading up to the battle and during the battle itself, those are things I'll never forget no matter how hard I try." She couldn't stop the tears from gathering in her eyes. Hermione blinked rapidly to clear them before they welled up and rolled down her cheeks.

"I apologize." Snape finally turned his head to look at her again.

"Why should you apologize? Voldemort was the one responsible."

"I played my part in his first ascent to power. I've always wanted to apologize to someone who has been hurt by him, but I could never bring myself to do so until now. The person was never right or the moment never came. You've paid the price and shouldered the consequences for the mistakes of many misguided wizards and witches, Miss Granger. You deserve the apology more than most."

Hermione couldn't stop the tears now, and she hastily wiped them away. "Thank you," she said in a thick voice. "I forgive you."

The corners of Snape's mouth lifted in the barest of bittersweet smiles. "Thank you," he whispered.

They sat in silence for several minutes. The only sounds were Hermione's sniffing and Snape's hand idly caressing the cover of the book in his lap. "I should go to bed. I'm sorry to have kept you up so late. You should sleep, Professor."

He nodded at her as she stood and retreated to the bedroom. Hermione spilled fresh tears on the clean pillowcase that night before she finally fell into a fitful sleep.

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*Author's Note: As always, thank you to Snarkyroxy for being such a wonderful beta. Also, thanks go out to Allyness and Jessica for lending me their eyes for this fic. And thank you all so (so, so, so) much for all of the wonderful reviews and comments about this fic. I appreciate it a great deal.*

## Mystery Patient

Chapter 12 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

### Chapter 12: Mystery Patient

Hermione was unsure how long she tossed and turned in fitful sleep. It was still dark outside when the sound of the front door woke her. Had she been resting well, the slight click wouldn't have disturbed her rest, but her heightened emotions and new feelings for Professor Snape were turning the wheels in her mind too fast for sleep. Grabbing her robe, she slipped into the hall and hurried to the window by the door. Snape was standing a few yards from the cottage, looking at the night sky. Before she could puzzle out what he was doing up so late, he Disapparated.

Opening the door, Hermione stepped out on the stoop and sighed heavily. She wanted to be let into his life, but he still had secrets he insisted on keeping. Only a person with troubles or secrets would sneak out in the middle of the night to Disapparate to some unknown place. Hermione's eyes widened. *Disapparate. Disapparate! Harry's spell!*

She rushed down the path to the spot Snape had last been. The exact frame of time one had to follow traces of the first person was something Harry and Ron had not worked out completely, but it had only been a few seconds between Snape's departure and that moment. Hermione closed her eyes and clenched her fists at her sides. *Please don't let me splinch myself*, she thought as she whispered the incantation and tried to relax enough for a proper Disapparation.

It was, without question, one of the most disorienting moments of her life, but she found herself only a second later in an alley next to a large building. She saw Snape, in his white dress shirt and black pants, turn the corner around the building and disappear from her sight. Hermione didn't have time to rejoice over her successful attempt at following him or she would lose sight of him. She felt absolutely ridiculous in her robe so she performed a quick charm to avoid notice and rushed after him.

As she neared the glass doors of the brightly-lit building, she realized that Snape had entered a hospital a Muggle hospital. She berated herself for thinking that he only would have visited a patient at St. Mungo's as she followed him up two flights of stairs. He stopped on the third floor and briskly walked down the hallway, giving the two nurses at the desk a nod of acknowledgement. He obviously came here often since they didn't question his presence so late at night.

She tiptoed by the nurse's station and peered through the small crack in one of the doors. Snape was sitting in a chair by a hospital bed with his hand resting on someone else's hand. She was unable to see whom the hand belonged to from the view afforded by the slightly open door. Snape produced a small phial from his pocket, and Hermione knew it was the potion he worked on the previous afternoon. His body moved out of her line of sight for several seconds. She could only assume that he was administering the potion to the patient in the bed.

He sat back down in the chair beside the bed and waited. Minutes ticked by, and his face was still the same, giving no indication that the potion was working properly. Snape dropped his head down onto his arms as he rested them on the side of the hospital bed. Hermione blinked back tears and turned away. It was hard to see Professor Snape in such a state, but as much as she wanted to help him, she knew he would be furious with her if he knew she had been spying on him in such a private moment. Ducking into an empty room down the hall, she Disapparated and returned to his bedroom.

She was extremely curious about the identity of the person in the bed, but he would never tell her unless she asked for the information, and she couldn't ask because that would reveal the fact that she had spied on him. However, now more than ever, she wanted to help him finish that potion. His misery and despair were palpable, constricting her heart into a painful lump in her chest.

Hermione estimated an hour of time passed between her return and Snape's return. She heard rustling at the other end of the house, and finally, the small light that had been lit when he arrived was snuffed out. She closed her eyes and forced herself to fall asleep again. She wouldn't be any help at all if she fell asleep on his desk in the morning.

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Sunday morning arrived, and Hermione dragged herself out of bed. She did her usual morning rituals quickly and threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She no longer felt the need to impress Professor Snape with her professional attire at all times. She found him in the laboratory. His elbows were resting on the island countertop, and his fingers were clenched tightly in his black hair. "Professor?" Hermione asked softly.

When he raised his head to look at her, Hermione saw just how distressed he was. His eyes were bloodshot, and the bags beneath them were even darker than usual. His rumpled clothes were the same ones he had worn the previous night. She wanted to order him to bed, but he would never agree to it; no one was more stubborn than Severus Snape. "Yes, Miss Granger?" he replied, blinking his eyes and trying to pull himself together.

"Would you please talk to me, sir?"

"Talk to you?"

"Yes, tell me what is wrong, tell me what is going on."

He snorted and turned his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're unwell, and you left the house in the middle of the night. You look worse this morning than I've ever seen you look. I'd like to help you, but I don't know how." She stepped further into the lab and slipped onto a stool across from him.

Snape gave her a small smile. "Thank you for appearing to care, Miss Granger. Most don't even give me the courtesy of that."

"But I *do* care!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I do not know why you would. There isn't much to care about in regards to me."

Hermione furrowed her brow and leaned forward to bring herself closer to him. "Professor, I think there is a great deal to care about. You're an intelligent, insightful, interesting, passionate person. I've never met anyone like you, and I doubt I ever will. I'm deeply honored to be working with you, and I'm thrilled that you've been treating me like an equal by letting me assist with your personal projects. I only wish I could do more to help you."

Snape's eyes were wide, and disbelief was written across his face. "Have you gone mad, Miss Granger?"

She laughed and shook her head. "You're also a saint for putting up with me."

Despite his dour mood, he laughed softly at her and looked away. "A saint, indeed." Snape paused and returned his gaze to her. "You're not as bothersome as I've alleged you to be, and I've enjoyed working with you over the past few weeks."

His admission made Hermione flash him a wide smile. "So, I was thinking about your potion the one for the coma patients."

The talk of work sobered Snape up, and the creases reappeared on his forehead. "Yes? What about it?"

"Well, there may be another way to go about it. You're positive that gotu kola is the best bet to stimulate brain cells?"

Snape nodded.

"The trouble is boosting its healing qualities enough to affect a patient, right?"

"Correct."

"What if we found an ingredient, like blue algae, that would make the body more receptive to the gotu kola instead of strengthening the gotu kola?"

Snape brought his hand up to tap his lips with a long finger. She watched him for nearly a minute as he thought her suggestion over. Finally, he nodded his head slowly. "That's a promising idea. Perhaps we can work on it today?"

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. "I'll run out to the nearest apothecary and get the blue algae. You prepare the base, and I'll be back in a few minutes."

Snape was already moving toward a clean cauldron when he replied, "I give you a compliment and suddenly you believe you can begin ordering me around." His voice didn't have the usual angry tone to it. Hermione simply smiled at him before Disapparating.

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Snape's hand covered Hermione's and guided it closer to the bubbling liquid in the cauldron. Hermione wasn't sure whether to faint or jerk away in shock. She could count the number of times she had touched Snape on one hand. He rarely let anyone into his personal space, and he avoided touching everyone. Such a casual gesture on his part unnerved her.

"You'll disturb the potion if you drop it in from that height," he said softly, lowering her hand even more. She let him direct her movements until he told her to add the last ingredient. They had both created the potion, and Hermione was surprised to realize they worked extremely well together. She imagined them as an old couple, turning, and spinning, and reaching for ingredients in a small lab, but never bumping into one another. She mentally laughed at herself for such a silly thought.

"Do you think it will work?" she asked, stepping back from the counter and watching him lower the fire with his wand.

He turned to face her. "Perhaps. I'll test it as soon as possible."

"On whom?"

Snape abruptly turned around and walked across the room to rearrange a row of empty jars. "That's none of your concern, Miss Granger."

"I helped you make the potion; I'd like to know who you're going to test it on."

"I'll let you know the outcome once I've tested it."

"But "

"I refuse to answer your question, Miss Granger; accept that and move on."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but a clicking at the window distracted her. A small barn owl was sitting outside with a white envelope tied around its leg. Snape did not make a move to let it in, so she walked across the room and slid the window open just enough for the owl to hop inside. It took flight and disappeared into the midday sky once she removed the letter.

"It's for me," Hermione said, opening the letter.

*Miss Jane Wharton,*

*After careful consideration we have decided to allow you to continue living in your current flat. However, you must remove all potion paraphernalia from your quarters, and you must cease all unauthorized potion-making, effective immediately.*

*Perdido Station Apartment Association*

Hermione frowned and folded the letter up.

"Miss Granger?" Snape looked slightly concerned. She never thought she'd see the day when he was concerned for her.

"It was from the Association. They've decided to let me return to my flat, but I can't experiment with potions anymore. They're making me remove everything from my place." She sat down on the stool with a heavy sigh. "I'll be bored out of my mind if they won't allow me to experiment. It's my passion. I can't think of anything that gives me more satisfaction."

Snape tilted his head to the side and watched her silently. Finally, after several moments, he spoke up. "Far be it from me to stifle the growth of a Potion Mistress in the making. You may use my laboratory after hours for as long as you like."

Hermione looked up at him in complete shock.

"Provided you aren't a nuisance," he added when he saw the smile growing on her lips.

She jumped up from the stool in barely contained glee. "Professor, thank you! I could... I could just... hug you right now!"

Snape looked uncomfortable. "Yes, well... please do not. Your verbal thanks is quite enough."

She was giddy at the thought of having access to his personal lab for all of her experimentation. He had also said she was a Potion Mistress in the making. It was enough to make her want to spring into a dance right in the middle of Snape's laboratory. "I've imposed on you long enough, Professor. I believe I'll go home and finish tidying up my flat. I appreciate your hospitality and our talks."

"Yes, yes. Off you go," he said, dismissing her. She could see he was uncomfortable with the gratitude and appreciation. He didn't exactly welcome compliments either.

Hermione retrieved her belongings from his bedroom and stopped at the door to the lab before she left. "Thank you, sir," she said in a soft voice.

He looked up from the cauldron to meet her gaze. "You're welcome, Miss Granger."

She smiled and walked down the hall with a spring in her step.

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*Author's Note: Thank you to Snarkyroxy for being such a great beta. Thanks also go to Allyness and Jessica for their help with this fic. And for all of those who have been wondering who is in a coma, I'll reveal that in the next chapter.*

## I'd Like You to Meet...

*Chapter 13 of 15*

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

### **Chapter 13: I'd Like You to Meet...**

The first night back in her own apartment would have been peaceful had she not being woken a few minutes after midnight. The frantic banging at her door startled Hermione out of a deep sleep. She sat up in bed, clutching the sheet to her chest and searching the dark room with wide eyes. It took several seconds to register that someone was knocking for entrance. She couldn't think of anyone who would be visiting her this late at night, but by the force of the knocking, it was someone who was quite desperate to see her.

She quickly pulled her robe on and grabbed her wand from the nightstand. It was better to be safe than sorry when woken after midnight by an unexpected visitor. Adjusting her grip on the wand, she unlocked the door, leaving the chain and her wards still intact. The small crack in the open door revealed her caller.

"Miss Granger." Professor Snape was standing outside her door, his hand resting on the doorframe. He appeared to be slightly out of breath and looked somewhat disheveled.

Hermione was extremely confused, but she quickly removed the chain and her wards from the entrance, swinging the door open wider. "Professor? What are you doing here?"

"I need you to come with me," he said, stepping inside her flat.

Hermione pulled her robe tighter around her body. She felt self-conscious with him looming over her. "Where?"

"It doesn't matter. Please dress yourself and come with me." His voice was breathy and quick. He didn't appear to be in trouble, but he was more excitable than usual.

Hermione looked at the clock. "Professor, it's after midnight. Where would you like me to go?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Well, yes, I suppose."

Snape extended his hand. "Then please get dressed and come with me. I can't explain here."

Despite her reservations, she couldn't turn him down and refuse to go with him. Her curiosity was much too strong to crawl back into bed without seeing what he obviously wanted to show her. Without a word, she retreated to her bedroom and threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She certainly hoped they wouldn't be going to a public place

because her hair most likely looked a mess.

As soon as she stepped out of her bedroom, Snape's arms were around her, pulling her close. Hermione opened her mouth in surprise, but he spoke first. "I'm going to Disapparate us both."

She closed her eyes tightly and felt the momentary confusion of dual Apparation. When she opened her eyes again, they were standing outside a large building in an empty alley. The wind whipped through the small space and blew her hair into her face. The harsh weather and large raindrops hitting the ground were disorienting after the dual Apparation. Before she could gather herself, Snape took her hand in his and pulled her after him. Hermione wasn't prepared or strong enough to stop him. She followed in his wake, stumbling down the alley and around to the front of the building. Bright lights cast a glow around the dark sidewalk in front. She immediately recognized the location from spying on Snape the previous night.

He pulled her into the hospital and up the flights of stairs, never letting go of her hand. She would have followed him regardless. If the potion worked, then she was about to meet the mystery person that Snape had been visiting. "The potion it worked?" she asked, gasping for breath as he opened the door to the third floor.

"Yes," Snape said, giving her hand a slight squeeze before he led her down the hallway. The nurses were buzzing about their workstation. They watched both Snape and Hermione with interest when the two passed by on their way to the room.

An elderly woman was in the narrow hospital bed, but her eyes slowly opened when she heard the commotion of people entering. She looked at Snape and smiled softly before turning her gaze to Hermione. Hermione shifted uncomfortably under the dark eyes. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but she didn't believe they had ever met.

Snape pulled Hermione forward and grabbed her shoulders, leading her closer to the bed. She could see the woman's eyes watching Snape's hands on her shoulders. Finally, the woman looked at Hermione's face, and she smiled warmly, the edges of her eyes crinkling up in happiness. "Hello, my dear."

Hermione opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She finally forced a soft hello out and then turned to look at Snape over her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit confused. I don't know who this is."

His long fingers gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze of reassurance. "This is Eileen, my mother. Mother, this is Hermione Granger."

If Snape's hands had not been on her shoulders, Hermione would have toppled over backward and fainted. The last person she had expected was to see his mother. She assumed his mother had passed away years ago. Never in her wildest dreams did she think Snape's mother had been in a Muggle hospital for who knew how many years.

"I, umm... Forgive me, but I'm just a bit surprised by all of this," Hermione said to the woman in the hospital bed. Snape slowly released his hold on her shoulders and stepped over to the other side of the bed to take his mother's hand.

"Surprised? Severus told me that you were the one who finished the potion."

Hermione looked at Snape, and everything fell into place. His mother had been in the coma for quite some time, and he had been working on the cure for nearly as long. The blue algae idea worked and created a potion that could revive coma patients. Not only had it worked, but Snape had told his mother she was responsible. "Well, I just made a suggestion," Hermione said, still watching Snape. She looked down to his mother again and gave the other woman a smile. "I'm very happy it worked."

Eileen's tired eyes twinkled as she returned Hermione's smile. "From the way my son has been talking, he admires you very much, Hermione."

"Oh?" Hermione looked from Eileen to Snape and then back again. His face was schooled into the usual blank expression, but his eyes were hooded and darting around the room nervously.

"Of course, my dear," Eileen said. "And I, for one, am very happy that Severus has found someone as beautiful and talented as you to balance out his gloomy side. Isn't that right, Severus?" Hermione blushed and glanced at the floor. She never was very good with compliments, and it seemed the Eileen Snape was under the impression that she was dating her son.

Snape intervened and shook his head. "Hermione and I are not... involved, Mother."

Eileen frowned at her son. "Why not? She's lovely, Severus. You spoke so highly of her."

"Mother, please. This isn't the time for a discussion of my love life." He seemed genuinely embarrassed, and Hermione relished his moment of weakness.

"Do you not think of him in a romantic sense, my dear?" Eileen's eyes returned to her.

Hermione was unsure how to answer the question. Of course, she was beginning to think of him in such a sense, but thinking was as far as it would get. She knew there would never be anything between her and Snape, despite how much it interested her or how often she had thought about it the past few nights.

Snape dismissed the question before Hermione could develop an adequate response. "Don't be silly, Mother. Miss Granger is old enough to be my daughter; of course she doesn't think of me in a romantic sense."

"Whatever you say, Severus," Eileen said with a smile. She stifled a yawn against a frail hand. "Oh, my, I apologize. It's been a long day for me."

Snape looked at the clock on the wall. "You should rest. I'll take Miss Granger home and return shortly."

"No, Severus, you should go home and get some sleep. You've been here for hours." Eileen looked at Hermione. "Make sure he gets to bed for me."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Snape, I will."

"You come back tomorrow morning after we've both rested, and we'll talk some more," she told Snape.

He opened his mouth, and Hermione could almost see the argument on the verge of spilling out. Instead, he nodded and stooped to kiss her forehead. "Rest well, Mother."

"And you, my son." Eileen looked at Hermione again. "Take care of him for me."

Hermione smiled at her before following Snape out of the room and down the hall. He stopped in front of the elevator instead of taking the stairs. They both stood in awkward silence before the steel doors. After several seconds of waiting, the doors opened to reveal a spacious elevator. She stepped inside first and hit the button for the ground floor. Once the doors closed, Snape slumped against the wall, his hands clutching the railing for support. His eyelids appeared almost translucent the way they were stretched over his dark eyes. He was obviously exhausted from the taxing day and needed the rest more than anyone.

"Can you Apparate, sir?" Hermione asked when the elevator doors opened.

"Of course I can, Miss Granger," he said, stepping out into the hall and slowly walking toward the exit. She followed behind, watching his body sway slightly as he walked.

When they reached the empty alley, she touched his shoulder. "I promised your mother that I would see you home to bed."

He turned and gave her a very small, weary smile. "I'm quite capable of doing that myself."

"Don't be so stubborn." Hermione stepped into him and wrapped her arms around his body. His initial stiffness over being touched dissipated, and he pulled her closer.

Laying her head against his chest, she Apparated them to his sparsely furnished living room. Apparently, her minor redecoration had been left intact because the plush couch was still sitting there in place of the two armchairs.

Hermione pulled her arms away from him and stepped back. Snape let himself fall back into the couch. He sighed and rested his head on the cushions behind him. He seemed more peaceful than she had ever seen him during all the years they had been acquainted. Hermione wasn't sure how long his mother had been in the coma, but judging from her deteriorated health and Snape's obsession, it had been several years. She sat on the cushion beside him and folded her hands in her lap. "Congratulations on the successful potion, Professor."

His eyes slowly opened. "It would not have been possible without you."

The warmth in his eyes made her nervous. She was unsure how to act around this side of him. She had always dealt with his difficult side or his academic side, but not with this more vulnerable part of his personality. Hermione found it intimidating. "I didn't know the potion was for your mother. Do you mind if I ask how she was injured?"

Snape closed his eyes again, and his brow furrowed. "I am to blame. It happened shortly before my first year at Hogwarts."

"How did you hurt her?" Hermione asked in the softest voice possible.

He sighed deeply. "I did not intend to hurt her. I was unable to control my magic at such a young age. My father did not know my mother was a witch, or that I was destined to become a wizard and study at Hogwarts. When I received the invitation, my mother was forced to explain the situation to him. He became exceedingly upset. I was a child; I had no idea that my emotions could manifest into powerful magic."

Hermione tentatively touched his shoulder. He finally opened his eyes to look at her. "He was irate, screaming and cursing at her, calling her a liar and a devil. I wanted to protect her, but I was no match for my father. So, I..." Snape trailed off and looked away. After a long minute of silence, he finally resumed his explanation. "My power escaped me and lashed out at him, but emotion does not aim well. It hit her instead." The regret in his voice was overpowering.

"The damage could not have been that bad. A competent Healer could have "

Snape shook his head. "My father forbid it, and I was too young to defy him. He admitted her to a Muggle hospital and told me that her fate was in the true doctors' hands that God would decide if she would live or die, not some other witch."

Hermione unconsciously rubbed his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Why didn't you ever go back for her when you were older?"

"St. Mungo's would be unable to help her. The Dark magic has been inside her for too long to heal. My only hope was to create a potion to revive her."

"And your father?"

"He's alive. Seven weeks ago one of the nurses told me that he planned on signing the proper documents to remove her feeding tube. She would die shortly after the removal. That is why I have been working so frantically on the potion."

"Couldn't you speak with your father? Make him see sense?"

Snape shook his head and removed her hand from his shoulder. He brought it down to his lap and placed it on his leg, his own hand covering hers. "He's disowned me and refuses to speak to me. After she was injured, he told me that I should go to Hogwarts and stay there. That's what I did. I haven't seen him in many years."

Hermione smiled softly and pulled her hand from beneath his. She lightly touched his black hair, smoothing the strands down with care. "I'm very happy that I was able to help you complete the potion," she said.

He looked so different sitting there beside her, unlike any time she had ever seen him before. He appeared to be receptive, willing to give and take. His demeanor was not harsh or overbearing, but actually hesitant. It was obvious he desperately wanted to talk to someone about the burden, but had not allowed himself to confide in anyone before. Hermione was honored that he trusted her enough to reveal himself so completely.

Gently, Snape touched the wrist of the hand stroking his hair. "I apologize for my mother's insinuations that we are involved," he murmured, watching her from lowered eyes.

"I didn't mind at all, actually," she replied with a subtle smile.

Snape's fingertips were playing over her wrist, his thumb rubbing hypnotic circles around her pulse point. "Surely you would be embarrassed at the mere thought of anything between us."

His touch was distracting and more arousing than Hermione cared to admit to anyone, even herself. "Oh, no, I disagree." She took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Despite what you may think I think of you, I hold you in the highest of esteem. You're a fascinating man, and I strongly believe that any woman would count herself lucky to enjoy this side of you."

She watched his lips go slack with shock. They parted to let his tongue dart out and quickly wet them in a nervous gesture. Her fingers were still lightly twined in his hair, and his hand was still holding her wrist against the side of his face. Surely he could hear the rhythmic thumping of her heart in the stillness of the room. *Perhaps I've gone too far, and the statement was too bold. I'll never be able to take it back now,* she thought.

"My mother likes you, you know," he finally said in a soft voice.

Hermione smiled at the veiled compliment. "Do you admire me as much as she claims you do?"

He removed her hand from his hair and sat it down on the cushion between them. "I admire you a great deal." After a silent moment he chuckled and looked away. "Although, I never thought I'd be telling you.

"You should get some sleep, Professor. It's late."

He rose from the couch and looked down at her with his new, unusually kind eyes. "Yes, I will. I want to bathe first, and then I'll go to bed."

Hermione raised a brow as if questioning the truth of that statement.

"I give you my word," Snape answered with a slight smirk.

She couldn't help but smile back at him. "You have no idea how happy it makes me to see you happy."

"And I'm sure I'll regret showing you I am capable of happiness," he replied. "Regardless, I want to thank you for your help in this matter of my mother and the potion. My gratitude exceeds mere words."

"You're welcome. Now, off to the bath with you."

She watched as he turned around and disappeared down the hall. His words had obviously been a dismissal. She had fulfilled her promise to his mother and brought him home safely. He had given her permission to leave, but Hermione wanted to make sure he actually did go to bed. Beside that, she couldn't seem to find the strength to



stand. The ghost of his touch was still tingling on her wrist and causing the butterflies in her stomach to flutter about restlessly. Deep, calming breaths only made the feeling worse.

Truth be told, Hermione had not given much thought to linking herself romantically with Snape. While she had grown to admire and respect him, and then find him attractive on more levels than simple physical attraction, she had not seriously considered a relationship beyond academic friends. Fantasies were as far as it went. He was too withdrawn and inaccessible, not to mention she was unsure if he would find her attractive. However, when his mother assumed that she and Snape were dating, Hermione's heart had ached at the thought. She had felt a strange compulsion to assure his mother that they were happily together.

*I really should leave him be. There's no reason for me to wait around here and tuck him in like a nanny.* Hermione slowly walked back to the bedroom and turned down the sheets for him. She also placed a warming charm on the bed linens to take away the sting of the cold sheets and make his rest more comfortable. Running a hand over his pillow, she smoothed away the wrinkles.

Hermione smiled to herself and turned to leave the room. Just as she stepped into the doorway she collided with someone. *Him.* Her palms were pressed against his bare chest, and his hands wrapped around her elbows to keep her from falling over. She looked down to see he was wearing a towel around his waist. The room was dark, and his pale skin seemed to stand out against the shadows on the walls.

Snape's hands slid up to grasp her upper arms, giving them a slight squeeze. She had to remind herself to breathe when his lips dipped down to the curve of her ear. His warm breath flowed over the sensitive skin there. "I'm sorry. I did not know you were still here, Miss Granger."

The butterflies in Hermione's stomach turned into a pit of writhing snakes. She contemplated lifting her head and turning it the slightest bit to the right in an attempt to kiss him. His mouth was closer to her own than it had ever been. Mere inches stood between her and a kiss from him. "Please call me Hermione," she whispered.

"Hermione," Snape said, testing the name. "I suppose I should offer the same courtesy to you. My given name is Severus."

Her heart was pounding and her mouth was dry. "I turned down your bed and warmed it for you."

"That was unnecessary, but kind of you, nonetheless." His fingers were slowly, gently kneading the muscles in her upper arms.

Hermione extracted herself from his grip and backed down the hall, watching him. "I shouldn't keep you from your sleep," she said. With a quick wave, she Disapparated.

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*Author's Note: As always, thank you to Snarkyroxy for being a wonderful beta. Thank you also to Allyness and Jessica for their help with this fic. Like I've said in the reviews, the answer to who is in the coma was actually very simple. Some of you came up with much more interesting theories on what was happening. ;-) I wish I had thought of some of those theories myself.*

## A Setback and a Step Forward

Chapter 14 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

### Chapter 14: A Setback and a Step Forward

Hermione Apparated to Snape's house as she did every Monday morning, but a quick inspection of the rooms revealed he was gone. She hoped he had slept well the night before because he had obviously gone to his mother's bedside again. She looked for a note from him, but there was nothing to be found, not even a list of potions for the day. Hermione spent nearly an hour arranging and rearranging the jars of ingredients on the shelves around the laboratory as she waited for him.

The minutes seemed to last for hours, making her anticipate his return all that much the more. After what had transpired between them the previous night, she was unsure how to act around him. Would it be best to treat him as she always had and hold him at a distance, or would he allow her to be more informal and friendly? Hermione desperately wanted to speak to him as a close friend, but she was unsure what his reaction would be.

The room was so quiet she could hear the ticking of the clock. Hopping off the stool she was perched on, she Disapparated to the alley beside the hospital. Luckily no one was within sight, relieving her of the need for damage control. She retraced their path from the previous night, and stepped onto the third floor expecting to find busy nurses and perhaps a food cart rolling around with breakfast. Instead, she was confronted with two very angry men a few yards down the hallway.

"If you touch her or try to pour those vile poisons down her throat, I will "

"What? What? Kill her? That's what you're doing right now!" Snape's back was to her and his arms were stiff, fists clenched at his sides. "I healed her! I can do it again!"

Hermione strained to see over her former Professor's shoulder. An older man with a face just as harsh was standing there, fury exuding from his very pores. "Take your delusions and your wickedness elsewhere, Severus. You aren't wanted here."

"She's going to die!"

"If that is her fate, then so be it. I will not have you interfere with this evil you try to masquerade as magic. I am saving her soul!"

"You're killing her and I " Snape broke off as the older man glanced past him, noticing Hermione. Looking over his shoulder, Snape saw her as well. His eyes cooled from fury to weariness. "Miss Granger, please leave," he said, nodding at the elevator behind her.

"Is she one of them too, Severus? Have you no decency? You brought *them* into this hospital, and you expect me to stand for it?" The older man took two steps around Snape and advanced on her.

Snape turned and grabbed his arm roughly. "If you touch her, I'll "

"You'll what? Kill me? Work your devilish wizardry on your own father?"

With a sound of complete disgust, Snape released the man's arm and took several long strides to where Hermione stood. He snatched her arm and pulled her back into the

elevator. "Professor?" she said after the doors closed.

Snape slumped against the wall and slid down to the floor. He shook his head at her, refusing to give any further details about what had happened. His face was pale, and his eyes were bloodshot and dull; he looked as bad as he had before his mother had been revived. "Tell me what's wrong," Hermione said softly, kneeling before him and pushing his hair out of his face. When he didn't respond, she stroked his face with a trembling hand. "Severus, please."

Her use of his given name startled him enough to evoke a response. "You shouldn't have come. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what? Tell me what has happened."

He shook his head again and turned his face away from her gentle fingertips. The elevator was moving, and Hermione knew it was only a matter of seconds before the doors opened and someone else joined them. She did the only thing she could think of she leant forward and wrapped her arms around him tightly, Disapparating them both before the metal doors parted.

They reappeared in the floor of her living room. Crookshanks let out a startled meow and stalked out of the room. The morning sun filtered through the sheer curtains and cast a sick, yellow glow on Snape's pallid skin. His face was contorted in helplessness and pain, his eyes empty of life. "Please, tell me what happened. Please." Hermione waited with bated breath as his thin lips parted.

"I can't go through this again," he whispered in a rough, heartbroken voice.

"Go through what? What has happened?"

He shook his head and turned away from her. "Cancer. They've discovered an inoperable tumor in her brain. The doctors say that even though she is out of the coma, they doubt she will live for more than a few months."

"The man arguing with you was your father?" Hermione asked, moving to kneel in front of him.

Snape nodded, his hair falling forward to curtain his face. "I don't want her to die, but he's forbidden me to do anything, and the legal rights are his." He paused and sighed deeply. "I'm not even sure I could do anything to help her now, and even if I could, she won't come with me. She says she must stay with my father."

Hermione didn't know what to say. He had only gotten his mother back hours before, and now she was being taken away from him again. After witnessing his sleepless nights and the aftermath of his guilt over hurting her, she could only imagine what kind of havoc this new development was causing in his mind. "I'm sorry, Professor," she said softly, watching his downcast eyes.

He shook his head and waved her apology away with a hand. "There is no need for you to apologize."

Shifting closer to him, she placed one of her hands on top of his. "I wish I could help. Is there anything I can do?"

"No," he replied, closing his eyes. His lashes cast dainty shadows across the skin below his eyes, and Hermione couldn't stop herself from raising her hand to touch his face. To her surprise, Snape covered her hand with his and pressed his cheek more firmly into her palm. Her breath hitched when he turned his head to slide his warm lips over the heel of her hand. Small puffs of his breath tickled her palm and wrist.

His acceptance of her touch made her bold. She settled on the floor beside Snape, wrapping her arms around him and pulling his head down to rest on her chest. He put up little resistance and nuzzled his head against her breasts. Hermione held him there with her fingers twined in his hair, gently massaging his scalp.

"You smell very good." His voice was startlingly close, but she tried to calm her nerves and make him comfortable. "No one has been this close to me in a very long time," he said.

Hermione smiled and bent to kiss the crown of his head. She opened her mouth to speak, but his movements made the words die on her lips. He positioned his mouth at her shoulder and slowly worked his way up to the sensitive spot where it curved up into her neck. His hot breath on her skin nearly threw her into a panic. In the last week she had entertained this fantasy once or twice, but the real thing was quite different. Fantasies were just that: fantasies; they would never happen, and there were never any true repercussions for indulging in them. His lips brushing over her pulse point drove home the fact that this was a very real situation.

Snape pressed hesitant kisses on her neck, his nose nuzzling the tender flesh there. As much as his actions scared Hermione, they also excited her. The fantasies she had indulged in about him were coming true, and she was unsure if she should stop him or if she should urge him on further. Her body was obviously on board for the latter course of action because her fingers were pressed against the back of his head, pulling him closer, and her chest was rising and falling swiftly and irregularly.

His warm breath fell on her ear just before the tip of his tongue traced her lobe. "I'm sorry, Hermione... so sorry," he whispered in a breathless voice.

"Why?" she managed to choke out.

He placed small kisses along her jaw line before he answered. "I shouldn't take advantage of you like this."

Before she could respond, he covered her lips with his own and kissed her. The move startled her momentarily, but she regained herself and returned the simple kiss. When his lips moved down to her neck again, she was able to speak. "You're not taking advantage of me, Professor."

"Severus," he reminded her between kisses on her throat.

"Severus," Hermione repeated. "I feel as if I'm taking advantage of you after all you've been through in the last few hours." She found it extremely difficult to talk with his mouth on her neck, but she got her point across in a trembling voice. He was only here on the floor of her flat because he was so distraught over his mother. The Severus Snape she knew wouldn't have kissed her or even touched her in such a way. His emotions were running high, and he was looking for comfort in any way he could find it.

He lifted his head and let his lips hover over hers. "I assure you, you are not taking advantage of me, Hermione." Sliding one of his hands over her waist, he moved the other to cup her right breast.

She couldn't take the teasing any longer and closed the small distance between their lips, kissing him. Though she initiated the kiss, he deepened it by parting his lips and tentatively pressing his tongue between them. She moaned and opened her mouth for him. The small sound of approval from Hermione seemed to add fuel to his fire. Snape moved a hand from her waist to the back of her neck. She felt his tongue trace the contours of her mouth, running along her teeth before it tangled with her own tongue.

The kiss was slow and leisurely, though an underlying urgency laced his movements. His hands roamed restlessly over her, she lost track of where they had been and what he had touched. All she knew was that he had thoroughly mapped her curves with his fingertips by the time they both pulled away for a breath. She watched him in wonder. Snape's face was flushed with healthy color, and his lips were glistening and slightly parted to allow strong breaths of air to be pushed out. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched her.

For a fleeting moment, Hermione considered stopping the encounter at the kiss, but she knew if she did he would never give her this chance again, nor would she ever see this side of him again. He would lock away any feelings or attraction he might have for her and, most likely, treat her like a student again. It was the last thing she wanted. She actually wanted him to continue to look at her the way he was at that moment, his eyes gleaming in the morning sun coming in through the window.

Hermione ran her hands up his chest and over his shoulders. She twirled strands of his hair around her fingers. "Shall we go to my bedroom?" she asked in a small, hesitant voice.

"Please," he replied, his eyes never leaving her face.

She extracted herself from his arms, still wrapped firmly around her, and stood on shaky legs. Snape took her extended hand and stood as well. She expected a moment of awkwardness as they walked across the flat to her bedroom, but Snape had other things in mind. His arms went around her waist again, and he stepped into her body as he dipped his head down to kiss her again.

Hermione threw her arms around his neck and allowed him to back her into the bedroom. She fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, but her shaking hands, divided attention, and lack of sight made it extremely difficult. Once they were standing in the middle of her bedroom floor, he took pity on her, placing gentle hands over hers and undoing the buttons himself. She was much more suited to the less delicate task of jerking the shirt out of his pants so he could shrug out of it. His bare chest was warm and mostly smooth beneath her fingertips.

"You wore your robes into the hospital," he whispered, trailing his fingers over the sleeves. Hermione had not even thought of the odd looks from the Muggles when she burst into the hospital in her blue robes. "I've been wondering what you always wear under these robes when you work with me."

"You've thought about that?" Hermione asked, looking up to meet his gaze.

Snape's fingers quickly unfastened the robes and pushed them off her shoulders. "Lately, yes." He took in her t-shirt and jeans. "I should have guessed you would be wearing these silly Muggle clothes."

"You... don't like them?" Her voice was soft and unsure.

He smiled and slipped both his hands beneath her shirt. She felt his slightly cool fingers moving up her sides. "Oh, no, I like them very much. They're quite easy to dispose of." With that said, he pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it on the floor. When his eyes returned to look at her bra, Hermione wanted to cross her arms over her chest. Before she could make the self-conscious gesture, he was on her again, his arms wrapped around her tightly. He guided her over to the bed, and he followed her down onto the mattress when she had no choice but to fall back on it. Suddenly his body was pressed full length against hers, and she was unsure where to put her hands. She settled for grasping his shoulders when he began kissing her exposed neck and chest again.

She vaguely felt a tugging sensation around her navel, but his body was blocking her view. All she could see was a mass of black hair over her breasts. It wasn't until the cool air of the bedroom hit her hips that she realized what he had done. Her jeans and panties were at her knees, and Snape continued to guide them down her calves until he encountered her shoes. Within seconds, he had pulled both the shoes and the clothes from her body. He kneeled before her on the bed and unfastened his slacks. Try as she might, Hermione couldn't look away as the pants fell to his knees. Their kissing and touching had obviously had an effect on him, if his straining erection was any indication. Though she had never been extremely forward in bed, Hermione wriggled her body and spread her legs wider in a silent invitation.

Snape rid himself of his slacks and settled between her thighs, his hands wriggling their way beneath her to unhook the bra. It was soon thrown on the floor with her other pieces of clothing. She was completely naked in bed with Professor Snape. Hermione mentally shook her head. *Severus. I am naked in bed with Severus Snape, and I desperately want him to make love to me.* He answered her wish with a kiss and a swift thrust into her depths. The sudden sensation of being filled tore a sharp gasp from her throat and curled her toes into the sheets.

As he began to move within her, he trailed his kisses down to her neck and latched his lips onto the most sensitive spot there, alternately sucking and laving it with his tongue. It was too much for her. She never thought they would be moving together, pressing their hips frantically into each other like this. His teeth grazed ever so slightly against her neck. Each of his strokes pierced through her and coiled the tension in her even tighter. "Don't stop," she said through labored breaths.

He heard her plea and increased his rhythm, pushing even deeper into her until she thought her head might hit the wooden headboard behind her. Hermione couldn't stand it any longer. Her release was so close, but she couldn't seem to catch it. Snaking a hand down her abdomen, she brushed two fingers over the slick nub protruding from her folds. He slammed into her just as she climaxed, her contracting walls ripping a low groan from him. A moment later his body tensed, and he buried his face in her neck. She felt him tremble before the eventual warmth as he released himself within her. Hermione ran her hands over his back, soothing his exhausted body and attempting to show his wounded mind some sense of support and affection.

"Thank you, Hermione," Snape whispered in her ear.

"You should get some sleep, Professor."

"Severus," he said, correcting her again. "Please call me Severus." She watched as he slowly closed his eyes and his breathing evened out. Hermione wasn't feeling all that tired after what she had just done with Snape, so she lay beside him in bed, watching him fall asleep. The lines eventually disappeared from his face as he settled into rest. She followed him into sleep not long after, even though she didn't think she was all that tired.

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*Author's Note: Thank you so very much to Snarkyroxy for her help as a beta. Thanks also go out to Allyness and Jessica for their eyes. I'm very happy that the story has been received so well. Thank you all of your wonderful comments and compliments. I appreciate it very much. There is only one chapter left, and I hope to have it submitted before the end of the week.*

## Some Sort of Resolution

Chapter 15 of 15

Hermione uncovers Snape's final remaining secret when he hires her as an assistant. Will she be able to keep her job and help him through another difficult time in his life? HBP-compliant.

### Chapter 15: Some Sort of Resolution

The clock beside her bed ticked over to twelve fourteen just as she opened her eyes. The midday sun was bright, dimmed only by the curtains across her bedroom window. In a matter of moments, the morning's events came rushing back to Hermione. She touched the indentation of the pillow where Snape's head had been. Her heart dropped when she realized he had left while she was asleep. She remained in bed, watching the clock's hand move toward the twenty-minute mark. Waking up alone was desperately depressing when she had been expecting to see his face.

Deciding to avoid further wallowing in regret and self-pity, she rose and wrapped the white sheet around herself. *I think a quick shower and something chocolate will make me feel better,* she thought. She scuffled through the bedroom and turned the corner to walk into the bathroom. The sight in there made her stop abruptly. Snape was

standing at the sink with his hands braced against the white porcelain and his head bowed down to stare at the drain. He was only wearing his black trousers, but the white shirt was hanging from the towel rack beside him.

"I apologize for my actions," he said in a clear, succinct voice.

Hermione adjusted the sheet and pulled it closer to her body. "Why?"

"I should not have taken advantage of you. I accept full responsibility and I "

"You didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do, you know," Hermione replied, cutting him off.

Snape lifted his head and stared at her reflection behind him in the mirror. He looked weary with a deep sadness in his dark eyes. "Hermione, you know who I am. Why would you want to get involved with me?"

"Isn't it enough that I enjoyed it, that I enjoy you?"

"You're very young."

Hermione tilted her chin up defiantly. "I'm old enough to know what we just did, and I'm old enough to know that I'd like to see where this can go."

Before she was aware of what was happening, Snape had whirled around and backed her up against the wall, his hands splayed on either side of her head. She opened her mouth to protest, but he swallowed her words in a passionate kiss. His tongue fiercely claimed her mouth and stole her breath. "You're a Gryffindor through and through, Hermione," he whispered once he pulled back. "And you are far too good for me," he added as an afterthought before pushing off the wall and walking out of the bathroom.

Hermione followed close behind and watched him pull his boots on over a pair of black socks. She stood in the middle of the flat as he brushed by her to retrieve his shirt from the bathroom. The sheet wrapped around her kept falling, and she was still in a state of shock over his reaction to her words. Her eyes widened suddenly as another thought occurred to her. As if the emotional roller coaster wasn't enough, she had forgotten to use a contraceptive charm before they had sex. Without such a charm, she could easily become pregnant. "Sir?" she said.

Snape looked up to meet her gaze. "Severus," he correctly softly.

"I did not use a contraceptive charm or potion."

He buttoned his shirt before replying, "I'm sterile, unable to father any children. Another hazard of being on the wrong end of one too many curses, it seems."

"Oh," Hermione said softly. While she had never believed Snape to be the fatherly type, it was still unfortunate that the decision had been taken from him. Actually, the choice had been taken away from her as well, if she was serious about him and their budding relationship. She shook the thoughts of the future from her head and looked up at him. "Where are you going?"

"I need to see my mother."

*His mother. Oh, how could I have forgotten? There is more going on in this world than us having sex.* Hermione made a move toward the bedroom to get dressed. "I'll come with you."

"No." Snape gently took her arms in his hands. "This is something I need to do alone."

She briefly considered pressing the matter, but she didn't want to push him when the relationship was so fragile. "Will you... be back?" she asked in a hesitant voice.

He gave her a slight smile. "If you will still be here."

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Hermione did not know what to do with herself. After a small lunch, she sat on the couch and waited for what seemed like hours, but it was really only twenty minutes. Her feelings and thoughts about Severus were tumultuous at best, and she wished he had stayed to help her work through them. However, she seriously doubted he would be much help even if he had stuck around.

The pang of regret that had hit her just after she woke was virtually nonexistent now. She only hoped he would not regret his actions either. She smiled to herself. The past few weeks had been extremely eventful and filled with both highs and lows, but the last thing she had expected was to be contemplating the repercussions of sleeping with Severus Snape. Despite that, try as she might, she could not imagine her future without him in it in some way. Only two weeks before, she had been crossing her fingers that he wouldn't sack her over a botched potion, and now she was craving his company for more than just talking.

She decided that sitting around all day, waiting for him to return, was not the best thing to do. Instead, she occupied herself with scrubbing the tiles in the kitchen and bathroom without magic. Hermione also dusted every smooth surface in the flat until there was not a speck of dirt to be found. All the while, she worried over Severus' situation with his parents. His father seemed so angry and hurtful toward him. Hermione couldn't imagine her father treating her in such a way. She hoped they would be able to find a middle ground between their points of view before his mother died from their stubbornness.

From what little she had spoken to his mother, Hermione found that she enjoyed the woman's company immensely. Eileen came across as kind, but strong with a mischievous streak. Goading Hermione about her possible relationship with Severus was quite funny in hindsight. She couldn't help but wonder if Eileen saw something between the two of them that Hermione had not seen herself until after she took him home that night.

The afternoon had nearly disappeared, and Hermione's arms were aching from all of the housework. She went into her spotless bathroom and jumped in the shower. Just as she was rinsing the suds from her hair, she felt a gust of cool air at her back. Suddenly, a warm arm wrapped tightly around her midsection, making her grab the wall for support and jerk her head around.

"Shhhh..." he said, pressing his lips to her ear and nudging her face back around with his cheek against hers.

Hermione could feel his naked body pressed against her back. It took all the concentration she had to keep her wits about her. "How is your mother?"

"Let's try something new, Hermione," he said, his lips brushing against her neck. "Let's see if you can *not* talk for a bit."

"But your mother, the tumor?" She bit her lip when his other arm wrapped around her and slid down between her legs.

"I do not wish to discuss that right now." He placed soft, open-mouthed kisses along the column of her throat. "Is this unpleasant for you?" he asked after a moment of silence. One of his hands lazily played with the curls between her legs while the other cupped her right breast.

Hermione fumbled for a response. "No, it's quite quite pleasant, actually."

"Very good. Now close that mouth of yours, and be as quiet as you possibly can."

Hermione pressed her lips together and wiped the water from her face. His hands grabbed her hips and spun her around to face him. His head descended just as she

caught sight of his face. He looked up at her from his spot on his knees, and used his hands to firmly position her against the shower wall, just out of reach of the spray from the showerhead.

He guided one of her legs over his shoulder and dipped his head between her thighs, gently lapping at the moisture there. She gasped and let out a startled noise. "Silence," he reminded her. Hermione was not sure she could be completely silent if he insisted on doing that so well with his tongue. Blindly reaching out, she grabbed the shelf where the soap was kept. Her other hand ended up buried deeply in the wet strands of his black hair.

Severus continued to alternate licking and thrusting his tongue into her until Hermione had to bite her lip to keep the moans of encouragement from spilling out her mouth. All her self-control fled when she felt two of his long fingers slide inside of her and his tongue move up to slowly, sensuously rub against just the right spot. "Oh, Severus..." she murmured, tightening her grip on his hair.

He looked up to meet her eyes and smirked before curling a finger forward. The tension in her abdomen built until she could barely contain the bucking of her hips. "I thought I told you to be silent." With that said, he buried his face between her legs again, spreading them even wider than before. It was only a matter of seconds before Hermione came in a shuddering climax, moans and gasps of pleasure tumbling from her lips and echoing in the shower stall. Snape stood and wrapped his arms around her trembling body to support some of her weight.

"I should have known a Gryffindor couldn't be quiet."

Hermione flashed him a lazy, self-satisfied smile. "It feels like you enjoyed it, too, *Professor*." She lifted a shaky leg and pressed her thigh more firmly against his erection.

"Yes, your lack of control is quite satisfying for me."

Hermione maneuvered around him, reversing their positions until his back was against the shower wall. His grip on her arms relaxed, letting her kneel in front of him. Looking up, she saw the expectant look on his face, and she couldn't hold back any longer. She took a deep breath and wrapped her lips around the tip of his shaft guiding it inside her warm mouth with one hand gripping the base.

Severus gave a soft grunt of surprise once she took all of him inside her mouth, laving the vein along the bottom of his erection with her tongue. Both his hands slid into the wet tangles of her hair, guiding her as his hips tilted forward just the slightest bit in excitement and impatience. When he spoke his voice was rough and breathless. "It's been too long, my dear. My control is... as lacking as yours."

Hermione hummed in acknowledgement and rolled her eyes up to watch his face. Within seconds, his entire body tightened and jerked. She loosened her grip on him and let him slip partly out of her mouth as he spent himself on her tongue and chin. The water from the shower soon washed the evidence away, but Snape was still watching her closely, his fingers flexing in her tangled hair when she pulled away completely. "I'm glad you came back this evening," she said softly.

"As am I," he agreed, pulling her to her feet.

Hermione covered the slight blush on her face by dipping her head out of his sight and turning off the water. She retrieved two large towels from the linen closet and offered one to him with a shy smile. He accepted it and wrapped it around his waist after he had dried himself. She took her time, slowly drying every inch of her skin with the fluffy towel. Once Severus left the bathroom, she finished and wrapped the towel around her body, tucking the end underneath her left arm.

Severus was sitting on the couch in just the towel, watching the bathroom door. Despite their recent intimacy, Hermione still felt uncomfortable when his penetrating stare focused on her. She folded her arms under her breasts in a self-conscious gesture that tightened the towel around her body. She hesitantly walked toward where he had sat. "How is your mother?"

His gaze slid down her body and settled on his lap before quickly glancing up at her and then back down at his legs. The next time he looked up, he caught her eyes with his dark, hooded ones just before he deliberately shifted his eyes to his lap again. Hermione moved closer and made a motion to sit beside him. He quickly caught her around the waist and easily pulled her into his lap. "I was inviting you to sit on my lap, Hermione," he whispered softly in her ear while she wiggled to find a comfortable spot.

"You could have just said, 'Would you like to sit on my lap?'"

Pushing her unruly hair to one side of her neck, he sighed deeply against her cheek. "They have given my mother no more than three to four months. The tumor is inoperable and untreatable."

"There has to be a way," Hermione said, trying to turn so she faced him fully.

He nuzzled her neck with his nose. "There are no known cures for cancer, even in the Wizarding world, and even if there were, my father has forbidden me from removing her from the hospital."

She lifted a hand and stroked his bare chest. "I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"He nearly threw me out, threatening to obtain a Muggle restraining order to prevent the corruption of my mother. She woke and talked him out of it, but refuses to leave the hospital of her own free will, claiming that she needs to stay with my father at this time." His voice was dull and uninterested. She knew that he had most certainly tortured himself over the situation, but such raw emotion had finally led to numbness.

"Your father is afraid of what he doesn't understand," Hermione said softly, trailing her fingers over his collarbone.

He nodded. "It is why my mother kept her magic a secret from him for so many years. If I had been a Squib "

"No," Hermione replied, hushing him. "This wasn't your fault, Severus. Did you speak to your mother at all today?"

"Briefly. She desires death, I believe."

"And you?"

Severus shook his head. "I simply desire her happiness," he said, before pausing and shifting Hermione forward so he could pick his wand up off the floor. "Accio note for Hermione." A small white sheet of paper flew through the air and settled into his palm. "She wrote you a note," he explained.

"What does it say?"

"I do not know. It is your note, Hermione, not mine."

She tentatively took the paper and unfolded it. Eileen Snape's shaky, barely legible handwriting was scrawled across the first half of the page.

Hermione,

I have little time left with my son, but I am happy to see he has someone in his life like you. Our acquaintance has been short, yet I am certain that you are the one for him. He spoke so highly of you to me before we were even introduced. I'm afraid he is just as he was at eleven unable to express his desires. Judging by his demeanor today, I can only assume that you have understood what he could not say to you. I am eternally grateful for that. I can only hope that you will forgive him his gloomy nature and dark moods, and love him in my absence.

Eileen

Hermione felt tears welling up and threatening to spill over her cheeks. Looking back to Severus, she saw that he had turned his head when she opened the letter so as not to read it himself. "Would you like to read it?" she asked.

"No," he said, taking the note from her hand and folding it several times before placing it on the arm of the couch. "It was intended for you, not me."

"Your mother loves you very much," Hermione whispered, reaching a hand up to touch his damp hair. He turned his head away to look at the sheer curtains pulled over the window. "Did you tell her about us?" she asked.

"Us? No, not in so many words, though she seemed to suspect something."

Hermione shifted in his lap to get a better view of his face. "You can tell people about us. I'm quite serious about you."

He finally met her eyes with his. "Quite serious?"

"Quite." Hermione smiled. "I want more than just today, if you're interested as well, that is."

"Interested in what exactly?"

"Something long-term that involves deep intellectual discussions, witty repartee, potion-making, and sharing a bed on a regular basis," she said, mindful of a nervous lump in her throat that blocked much of the air her lungs needed.

Snape raised a brow, showing slight interest.

"Your mother said I should make you happy," Hermione said with a mischievous grin.

"Did she, now?" Snape asked, the corners of his lips turning up in a smile.

Hermione nodded. "Oh, yes. You once said I should respect my elders, so I would like nothing more than to carry out what she requests of me."

"Perhaps I should read that letter after all." Snape snatched the letter up and began to unfold it.

Hermione pulled it away before he finished revealing the text. "That's private."

He laughed, and she saw how beautiful his eyes were when they danced with amusement. Finally, he regained his composure, but the laugh lines were still creased into the skin around his eyes. "My mother believes I'm in love with you."

Her heart stopped, and when it restarted the beat was twice the usual speed. "Are you?"

"You expect me to tip my hand this early?" he asked with a slight smile and raised brows. "We've got years, haven't we?"

She tossed her head back and laughed. The laughter faded out when she felt his warm lips pressed against her collarbone. "It's the first day of the rest of your life, Severus Snape," she said.

"I certainly hope the second half will be better than the first."

Hermione used her hand on the back of his head to return his lips to her chest. "It will be if I have any say in it."

Severus moved his lips up her neck, spreading kisses haphazardly along her jaw line and chin before meeting her lips. "You're quite unique, you know," he whispered softly against her mouth.

"And you are a wonderfully complicated man, but I think I'm going to enjoy that a great deal."

Severus' tongue found its way into her mouth just as his hand slid up her thigh beneath the towel. "What will Potter and Weasley think?" he asked, pulling back just enough to allow her a breath of air.

Hermione grinned. "I don't particularly care, but if they have anything bad to say, they can put a sock in it."

FINIS

Author's Note: Thank you to Snarkyroxy for helping me through this fic and correcting my atrocious grammar. And as always, thanks also goes out to Allyness and Jessica for their help as well. I'd also like to thank everyone who left me a review or comment for this fic. You are all awesome, and you've motivated me to continue to write in this fandom.